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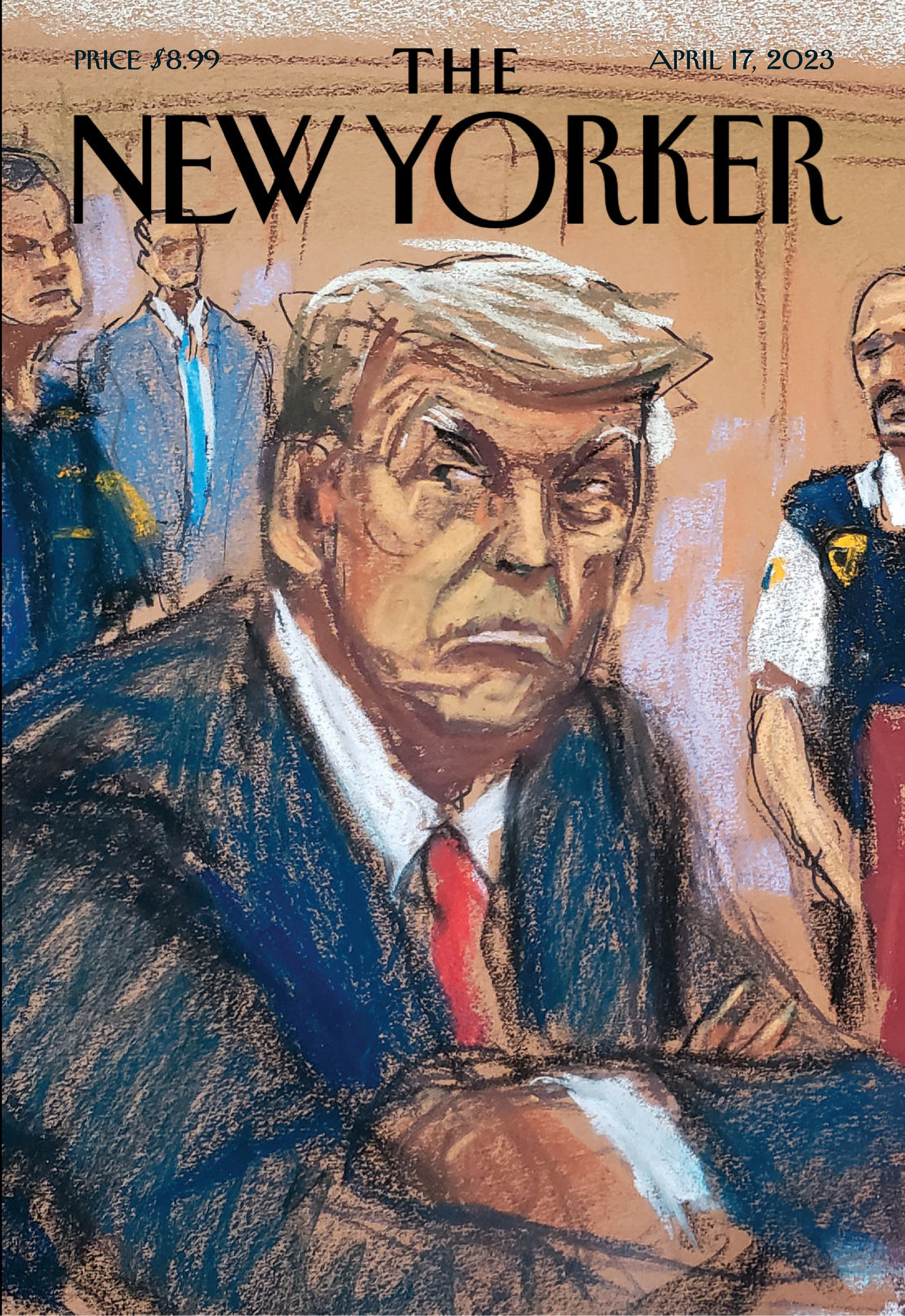

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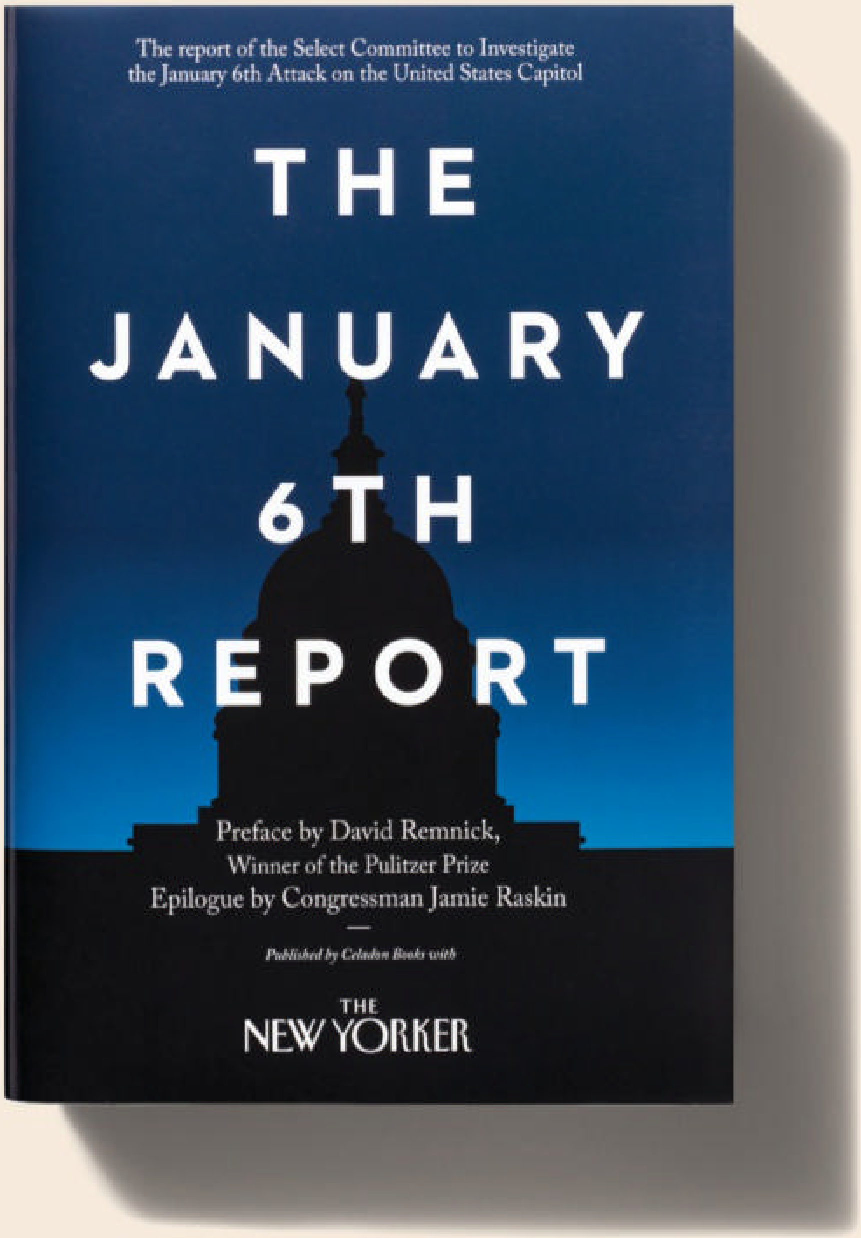
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DRAWINGS *Diane de Ferran, Dahlia Gallin Ramirez, William Haefeli, Elisabeth McNair, Edward Koren, Roz Chast, John Cuneo, Amy Hwang, Navied Mahdavian, Daryl Seitchik, Carolita Johnson, Mark Thompson, Tim Hunt, Maddie Dai, Mike Twohy* SPOTS *Ron Barrett*

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CONTRIBUTORS

Melissa del Bosque (*"The Bunker," p. 30*) has written about the U.S.-Mexico border since 1998. She won both a National Magazine Award and an Emmy for her reporting in 2015.

Charles Bethea (*"Special Sauce," p. 24*), a staff writer based in Atlanta, received a 2021 Mirror Award.

Jane Rosenberg (*Cover*) has been a courtroom sketch artist for more than forty years.

Steve Martin (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 23*) is an actor, a musician, and a writer. He recently published a memoir about his career, "Number One Is Walking," illustrated by Harry Bliss.

Laurie Colwin (*Fiction, p. 50*), a fiction writer and a food writer, died in 1992. Her complete fiction works were reissued in 2021.

Tadeusz Dąbrowski (*Poem, p. 53*) is a Polish writer. Two of his poetry collections, "Black Square" and "Posts," have been released in English.

Kathryn Schulz (*"Family Values," p. 42*), a staff writer, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Her newest book, "Lost & Found," was published last year.

Alexis Okeowo (*"A Tragic Run," p. 16*) is a staff writer and the author of "A Moonless, Starless Sky." In 2020, Okeowo was named journalist of the year by the Newswomen's Club of New York.

Alex Ross (*Musical Events, p. 70*) has been the magazine's music critic since 1996. His latest book is "Wagnerism."

Kim Addonizio (*Poem, p. 36*) is the author of many books, including the memoir "Bukowski in a Sundress" and the poetry collection "Now We're Getting Somewhere."

Vinson Cunningham (*The Theatre, p. 72*) is a theatre critic for *The New Yorker*. His début novel is forthcoming.

Casey Cep (*Books, p. 63*), a staff writer, is the author of "Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee."

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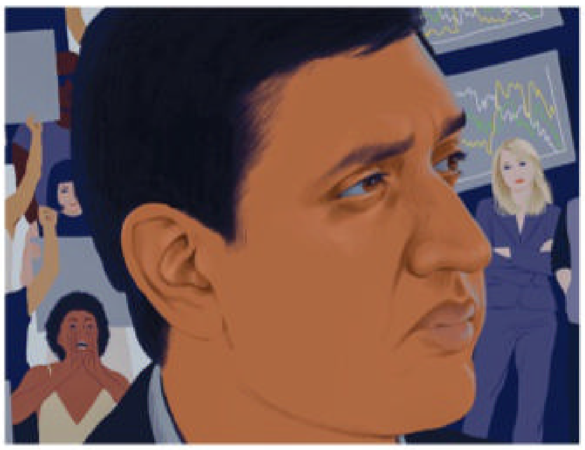
Parul Sehgal on the actress Jodie Comer's role as a barrister who defends clients accused of sexual assault.



THE POLITICAL SCENE

Benjamin Wallace-Wells on how Ro Khanna, a California progressive, helped bail out Silicon Valley Bank.

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LEFT: CECILIA CARLSTEDT; RIGHT: LAURA LANNES

THE MAIL

BEYOND OZEMPIC

As a fat person dedicated to the cause of fat liberation who has followed media coverage of Ozempic closely, I found Jia Tolentino's article to be the most nuanced one that I have read ("The Ozempic Era," March 27th). But I wish that she had included the voices of fat people who are happy, healthy, not seeking thinness, and fighting for fat acceptance. We are the real experts on fatness as a social category subject to bigotry and bias. To borrow a phrase from the disability-justice community, there should be "no conversations about us without us." It's disappointing that a writer and a magazine I respect so much have missed an opportunity to tell a fuller version of this story.
Savala Nolan
Richmond, Calif.

I am an overweight man who has used Ozempic for several years. My only criticism of Tolentino's piece is that, like most other coverage of diets, obesity, eating disorders, and so on, its emphasis on female body-image issues obscures the fact that women are not the only people who deal with being overweight. The media's presentation of obesity as an overwhelmingly female problem is part of what makes it difficult for men to step forward to try to change their situations, and also the reason that, when they do, they are often seen as vain and weak.
Steve Zorthian
New York City

I appreciated Tolentino's acknowledgment that structural factors play a large role in increased rates of obesity and diabetes in the U.S. The rise in obesity rates from less than fifteen to more than forty per cent in the past forty years can be attributed in part to the American diet's shift toward ultra-processed and sweetened foods and beverages, which have high calorie content and have been shown to be nearly as addictive as tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs. There are many legislative and regulatory measures that would help to address this problem: robust package-labelling requirements, limitations on added sugars in food products, vigorous oversight of food marketing to children, and reducing the extent to which our food is industrially produced.
James Lytle
Jamaica Plain, Mass.

THE REALITY OF POVERTY

I was deeply touched by Margaret Talbot's review of Matthew Desmond's book "Poverty, by America" (Books, March 20th). I did not grow up in poverty. My parents paid for my undergraduate education. After I graduated from my M.F.A. program, however, I was saddled with student debt, and since then have often worked three jobs (much of the time because I was employed by businesses that realized they could save on labor costs by limiting full-time staff). Talbot's comment that many people who are eligible for food stamps do not apply didn't surprise me—I know from personal experience that applying for such programs often requires information that is complicated to obtain. And the offices of those programs are not always easy to reach. They offer assistance by phone, but only during business hours, on weekdays. Rarely have I been able to talk to someone after waiting less than an hour; I've been on hold for more than two hours on several occasions. If I did have a full-time job, I'd probably have thrown my hands up and walked away. Talbot notes that much of the U.S.'s social spending goes to programs that help the wealthy, such as tax credits and homeownership subsidies. For a country so rich, we should make it easier for those who need help the most.
Buffy Aakaash
Marshfield, Vt.

•

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MOZART
DON GIOVANNI
ON STAGE MAY 5–JUNE 2

Tony Award–winning director Ivo van Hove makes a major Met debut with a riveting new production of Mozart's timeless tragicomedy. Baritone Peter Mattei—hailed by *The New York Times* for his "commanding … impetuous and charged" interpretation of the title role—headlines a stellar cast, conducted by acclaimed maestro Nathalie Stutzmann in her Met debut.

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The Metropolitan Opera

PHOTO: PAOLA KUDACKI / MET OPERA

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

For her turn in City Center's "Artists at the Center" series, April 13-15, the ever-radiant tap dancer **Ayodele Casel** is sharing the spotlight. She has curated five short works from paired choreographers, mixing the well known (Michelle Dorrance, Caleb Teicher) with the up-and-coming. Loosely woven together, these pieces make up the program's first half. The second is an expanded version of Casel's 2021 work "Where We Dwell," an earnest, engaging joyfest with live music by the singer-songwriter Crystal Monee Hall.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN RITTER

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

ART

Tauba Auerbach

Materials in flux—and their mathematical modelling and visual indexing—is an enduring theme of this American artist's mysterious abstract work. One suite of paintings in Auerbach's new exhibition is based on microscopic views of foam: tiny raised dots of acrylic color articulate shadowy craters and cells in a palette that ranges from pastel to lurid. It's tempting to see such depictions of transience as compositionally random, but this meticulous rendering highlights the underlying order of the bubbly, emergent forms. The aesthetic effects of surface tension and temperature are the subject of a series of glass sculptures, aptly named "Spontaneous Lace"—mounted vertically, the objects have a feathery, decorative presence and protrude from their aluminum armatures like dorsal fins. Nearby, on sleek metal plinths, sculptures made out of spherical beads recall scalloped collars, necklaces, and strands of DNA. These works, which are each titled "Org," are the most crystalline and controlled in the exhibition. Seen from a distance, they have an almost schematic air. But up close they appear handcrafted, imperfect—perhaps even alive.—*Johanna Fateman (Paula Cooper; through April 22.)*

Claude Gillot

A sign near the entrance to this exhibition, titled "Satire in the Age of Reason," suggests using one's phone as a magnifying glass, the better to view the intricate works of Gillot, an early-eighteenth-century French draftsman. The most devilish pieces here were executed in a technique known as *rosaille*—the busy figures of small, louche compositions emerge from a bacchanalian haze of red chalk. A selection of seventy or so drawings, prints, and paintings presents the artist as a sly social critic, who used scenes of pagan feasts and commedia-dell'arte players as a smoke screen for his favorite subject: aristocrats behaving badly. "Festival of the God Pan," circa 1695-1700, has a pleasing symmetry shared by all the artist's works; close inspection reveals debauched and risqué interactions between mythical beings. The etched and engraved "Witches Sabbath with Bodies Being Burned," circa 1720, is even more grotesque: an absurd panorama of ghoulish rites, it pokes fun at both superstition and prurient fantasies of the occult. Though Gillot was ultimately surpassed by his students—especially Jean-Antoine Watteau—here the elder and lesser-known artist shines, delivering proto-rococo gaiety with a delightful edge.—*J.F. (Morgan Library & Museum; through May 28.)*

DANCE

Dancing the Gods

Every spring, this festival, hosted by the World Music Institute and curated by the Indian-dance performer and expert Rajika Puri, brings top dancers from the rich and varied world of classical Indian dance to New York. Their performances are often revelatory. There are two soloists this year, both from India, each accompanied by live music. Sreelakshmy Govardhanan (April 14), a dancer who captures the audience's attention from the moment she steps onstage, performs a program of Kuchipudi, a dance from Andhra Pradesh with a distinctively buoyant, fluid accent. In contrast, Praveen Kumar (April 15), a bharata-natyam dancer, is known for the subtlety and intelligence of his dancing and gesture.—*Marina Harss (Ailey Citigroup Theatre; April 14-15.)*

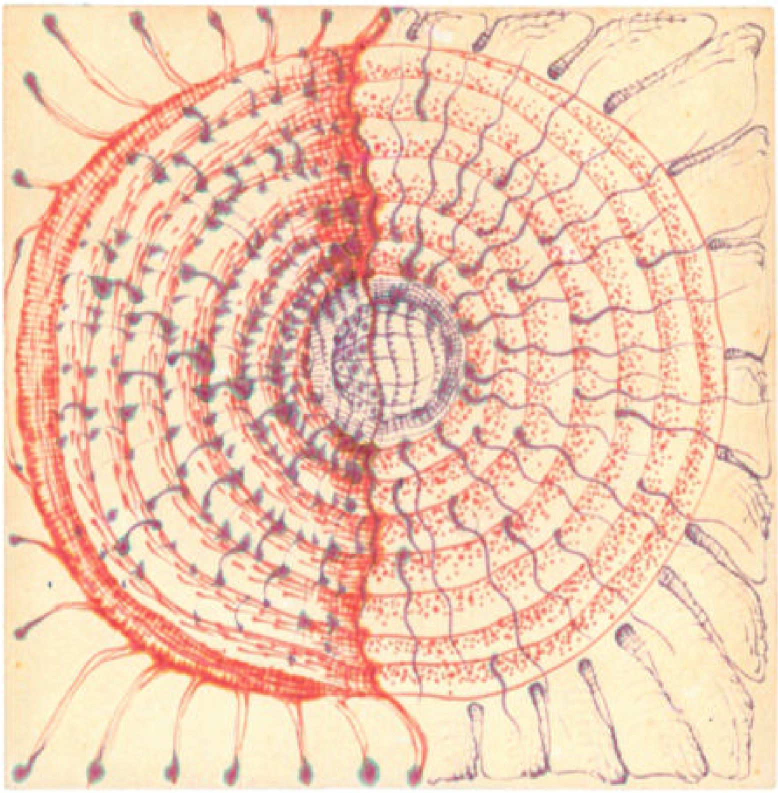
E-Moves

The annual dance showcase at Harlem Stage dovetails with the institution's seasonal focus on the Black Arts Movement. Curated by Stefanie Batten Bland, the program includes works by three rising voices. Jamal Abrams plays with a shadow self in "SAB & the Gatekeeper." In "Myths until you hold me," Kayla Farrish takes a visceral approach to herself as a Black woman. And, in "ok, let's try this again," Ogemdi Ude looks at her own artistic preoccupation with grief and loss.—*Brian Seibert (Harlem Stage; April 13-15.)*

La Mama Moves! Festival

This monthlong festival continues with two shared programs. In one, co-presented with the New York Arab Festival, Nora Alami and Jadd Tank début "3rd Body," which addresses the complexities and contradictions of Arab

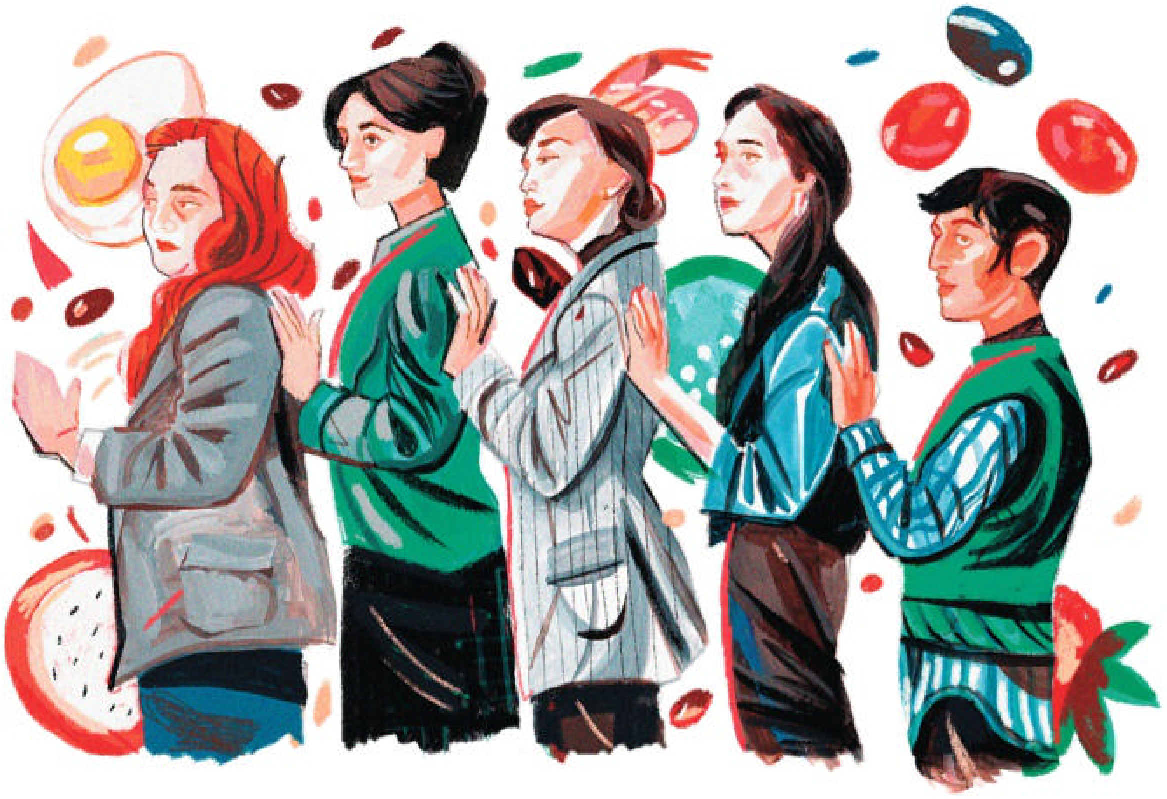
AT THE GALLERIES



The Drawing Center offers a mystic's-eye view—and a sense of deep time—in **"Of Mythic Worlds,"** a sanctuary of an exhibition organized by the inimitable Olivia Shao, a curatorial alchemist. (The show is up through May 18.) Fifty-three works, mostly on paper, dating from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, were guided into existence by figures as various as the French semiotician Roland Barthes (whose phantasmic ink squiggles, from the nineteen-seventies, evoke firing synapses) and the young American sculptor Robert Bittenbender (whose fragmentary pastel, from 2018, looks more excavated than rendered by hand). The identities of some artists are lost to the ages, including a Shaker from upstate New York and a Tantric adept from Rajasthan, India. There are museum staples, such as Betye Saar and Georgia O'Keeffe, but certain big names, like Barthes and the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, are better known for their achievements in other realms. (Readers of this magazine may be especially enticed by Janet Malcolm's gnomic collages.) Shao's show poses a paradox: How to give form to the unseen? One answer: by using as muted a palette as possible. Aside from ballpoint-pen blues, the salient colors in this predominantly gray, black, and white installation are jolts of red (notably in the Bay Area avant-gardist Jordan Belson's "Brain Drawing," from 1952, pictured above) and ochre, the same shades found on the walls of caves in the oldest works of art on the planet.—*Andrea K. Scott*

COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY / ESTATE OF JORDAN BELSON

OFF OFF BROADWAY



In Sarah Einspanier's tart, heartsick comedy **"Lunch Bunch"** (presented by PlayCo and Clubbed Thumb, at 122CC, through April 22), a group of public defenders—zipping around in rolling office chairs—distract themselves from their punishing family-court caseloads with a weekly gourmet-vegetarian lunch-sharing plan (barbecued jackfruit sandwiches, salads with turmeric, seasonal vegetables, always lovingly described). Their work is full of defeat and other people's loss, so small pleasures assume ridiculous levels of import; an enthusiastic newbie (Julia Sirna-Frest) rubs the group's perfectionist (Ugo Chukwu) the wrong way and we worry for her future, since an ejected member of the group (David Greenspan) was cast very far out—all the way back to the prehistoric past, when lunches were more mammoth-forward. In a stacked cast, Sirna-Frest and Jo Mei, who plays the most unflappable of the lawyers, stand out for their, respectively, flustery and chilly comic approaches; Chukwu manages to be charismatic even in quivering breakdown. The director Tara Ahmadinejad keeps the pace high for this snack-size, hour-long show, but you digest it over the next several days, as you remember the real-life details—families torn apart, the advocates' emotional burnout, the grinding judicial system—served as side dishes alongside the absurd main course.—*Helen Shaw*

American identity through scripted simulations; Lime Rickey International (the alter ego of Leyya Mona Tawil) offers "Malayeen Voices," performing songs and dances from an imagined homeland. In the other program, Wendy Perron and Morgan Griffin, a former student of Perron's, present a duet based on photos of a solo titled "The Daily Mirror," which Perron made in 1976, and the young duo Baye & Asa vigorously takes on male insecurity and entitlement in "Suck It Up."—*B.S. (La Mama; through April 30.)*

Vuyani Dance Theatre

In "Cion: Requiem of Ravel's Boléro," the South African choreographer Gregory Maqoma takes a syncretic approach to dance and storytelling, bringing together traditions and ideas in order to delve into deeply rooted fears and sorrows. The work, which premièred in 2017 and now comes to the Joyce, is loosely inspired by the South African writer Zakes Mda's novel about a professional mourner; that mourning, in turn, becomes music, by a quartet performing in the Zulu a-cappella song style isicathamiya, made familiar in the U.S. by the band Ladysmith Black Mambazo. The singing also incorporates Ravel's driving "Boléro," which, Maqoma has said, suggests a funeral procession. The dancing that emerges flows between traditional South African forms and elements of hip-hop and popping and locking. Through this rich and evocative language, Maqoma explores themes of death, violence, and ghostly presence.—*M.H. (Joyce Theatre; April 12-16.)*

THE THEATRE

The Hunting Gun

In the playwright Serge Lamothe's stage adaptation of Yasushi Inoue's 1949 novella, the topic is infidelity but the subject is written text itself. After a voice-over shares a short framing story, three women (all played by the chameleonic Miki Nakatani) speak aloud letters they have written to the mysterious Misugi, an unspeaking figure (Mikhail Baryshnikov) who moves in slow motion behind a scrim. Each letter exposes the misunderstandings of the one before—there's a girl who can't perceive the adult drama playing out in front of her, a wife who reveals her knowledge of her husband's affair, and the mistress, with her own surprising thoughts. The director François Girard has spent his production's prodigious artistic resources on creating the reflective correlative of the contained mind: for instance, the designer François Séguin's miraculous floor transforms from a dark lily pond to a gleaming, still dark wooden deck. It's a quiet, tense project, and since the performance is in Japanese much of the audience follows along via English supertitles. Thus the show's own written text enforces the story's message about reading's intimacy—and its capacity for elision.—*Helen Shaw (Baryshnikov Arts Center; through April 15.)*

Public Obscenities

When the Bengali American Ph.D. student Choton (Abrar Haque) brings his cinematographer boyfriend, Raheem (Jakeem Dante Powell), to a family home in Kolkata on a research trip, we assume that Choton understands the dynamics among his aunt (Gargi Mukherjee) and uncle (Debashis Roy Chowdhury) and their household caretaker (Golam Sarwar Harun). He speaks Bangla, after all, translating for Raheem, teaching him to tuck in his malaria net, and interviewing locals about the Indian queer scene. However, Raheem's careful eye sees things that Choton can't. Love stories hide in obscure places, such as an online pool-playing app (projected on a wall onstage) or the family's past, and only assiduous attention can reveal them. The playwright-director Shayok Misha Chowdhury's bilingual text and production are both gorgeously precise. The night I went, a scene between Choton and an interview subject, Shou (the delightful Tashnuva Anan), wasn't supertitled, yet even the non-Bangla-speaking members of the audience stayed rapt. It was a projection error, and the company played the scene again with the translation. But it was a testament to how convincingly Chowdhury had built his world—and to how carefully he had taught us to listen.—*H.S. (Soho Rep; through April 16.)*

Sweeney Todd

In Stephen Sondheim's grim, exhilarating horror operetta, from 1979, the titular demon barber, wronged husband, and world's most horrifying sous-chef murders Victorian Londoners so that his landlady, Mrs. Lovett (Annaleigh Ashford), can pop 'em into pies. Played by the honey-voiced baritone Josh Groban, this Sweeney isn't quite the servant of "a dark and a vengeful god," as the libretto would have it; he's more a broken and regretful cipher, with a voice that pushes back the inky gloom of Thomas Kail's sometimes raggedly directed production. Kail keeps Groban seemingly

ILLUSTRATION BY K. WROTEN

miles away from the audience, up a staircase set well back on the stage, and Sweeney therefore cedes the show's primary energy to Ashford's riotously funny, capering version of Lovett—the play spins and twirls like a whirligig along with her. Any wild grandeur the evening possesses is mainly allocated to the twenty-six-person orchestra playing like mad under the stage; the eager audience, in love with Groban or Sondheim or the event itself, provides its own dynamics, screaming before Sweeney's razor ever catches the light.—*H.S. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/10/23.) (Lunt-Fontanne; open run.)*

MUSIC

"Carlos Henriquez Celebrates Mario Bauzá"

JAZZ Behind every great big band, there's a great arranger—the organizing visionary who helps set the ensemble's sound. In the case of Machito and His Afro-Cubans, a formative forties dance orchestra that established the merger of Latin music and jazz in the United States, that man was Mario Bauzá. Machito fronted the band, singing and playing maracas, but Bauzá, as musical director, succeeded in bringing off an indelible fusion by mating the rhythmic pulse of the Caribbean with swing and, later, with bebop. Both men are legends to those in the know, but Machito is the one with a Spanish Harlem intersection named after him. Carlos Henriquez, the bassist with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, pays tribute to the genius behind the scenes. A fourteen-piece group crowds the bandstand, complete with a hefty horn section and a characteristic timbales-conga-and-bongos percussion team.—*Steve Futterman (Dizzy's Club; April 16.)*

Depeche Mode

ROCK Depeche Mode's new album, "Memento Mori," the band's first without its late co-founder, Andy Fletcher, is likely its best this century. Any group that has been performing for four decades has endured the boom-or-bust nature of pop-cultural relevance, but few find new career peaks after outliving bands that they have influenced. Since débuting, in 1981, Depeche Mode has remained one of the world's defining electronic acts, producing an intoxicating synth-pop sound that helped further both contemporary airplay and more fringe styles. With a trio of sharp, futuristic albums—"Black Celebration," from 1986; "Music for the Masses," from 1987; and "Violator," from 1990, each more audacious and morose than the last—the group invented an incomparable style. They continue to riff on these themes, making haunting songs fit for a "Tron"-like world.—*Sheldon Pearce (Madison Square Garden; April 14.)*

High Vis

ROCK The London band High Vis channels its central influences—Brit-pop sweep, baggy Madchester shimmer, and hardcore punk—in feeling more than in style. Its throttling power and enveloping choruses are the sort that can make a listener feel invincible. Within this fortifying sound, High Vis creates space for vulnerability, in songs that subtly interrogate how emotional repression and buried traumas maintain status-quo cultures of masculinity. "Talk for hours / I hardly know ya," the front person Graham Sayle lets out, like a bark inside a soaring hook, on the album "Blending," from last year. On this first-ever North American tour, the group is promoting that ripping LP, which also gives voice to lost friends and working-class struggle. Sharing the bill in Brooklyn is the similarly gruff but affecting Washington, D.C., band Glitterer, led by the novelist and Title Fight vocalist Ned Russin.—*Jenn Pelly (The Meadows; April 14.)*

"*Love Injection:* 8 Year Anniversary"

DISCO The Brooklyn fanzine *Love Injection*, published by the d.j.s Barbie Bertisch and Paul Raffaele, chronicles New York's nightlife history with genuine enthusiasm and welcome depth. Bertisch and Raffaele also host an engaging weekly show on the Lot Radio, and like their publication it's heavy on disco's precursors, particularly jazz and Afro-Latin sounds—a persuasive argument for the intimate threading together of disco's history and that of New York music in general. They celebrate the magazine's eighth birthday by spinning from open to close.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Public Records; April 15.)*

New York Philharmonic

CLASSICAL András Schiff—an elegant pianist in the equanimous works of the Classical era, which balance feeling and decorum—is the New York Philharmonic's artist-in-residence this season. He conducts the ensemble from the keyboard in Haydn and Mozart concertos on a program that also includes Schubert's exquisite "Unfinished" Symphony. Next week, Iván Fischer steps up to the podium to lead Schiff in Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 3, a piece with felicitous neoclassical touches, which they recorded together in the nineties. Later, David Geffen Hall plays host to the Taiwan Philharmonic, which performs Ke-Chia Chen's "Ebbs and Flows" and Debussy's vast "La Mer" on April 21, during its first visit to New York.—*Oussama Zahr (David Geffen Hall; select dates April 14-22.)*

U.S. Girls

ART POP The line separating pop and its weirdo cousin, art pop, can be thin and mysterious—but you always know it's there. Sometimes the demarcation is built on attitude, sometimes lyrics, and sometimes old-fashioned eccentricity. U.S. Girls, the performance vehicle for Toronto's Meg Remy, draws on this whole potpourri to form a kind of art-school disco. The singer doesn't read as ironic; she's more like an alien who has descended to Earth, surveyed our sound waves, and set about creating records. U.S. Girls' new album, "Bless This Mess," amplifies the impression, with Remy's songs giving beat to meditations on what can be an uncanny theme: new motherhood. At Roxy Cinema, a night before U.S. Girls' concert at Elsewhere, the musician hosts a screening of "Out of the Blue," a Dennis Hopper film that, like Remy's work, has an unsettled air speckled with punk.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Elsewhere; April 17.)*

MOVIES

Elysium

Neill Blomkamp's busy and indignant 2013 film is set in the year 2154. The title refers

HIP-HOP

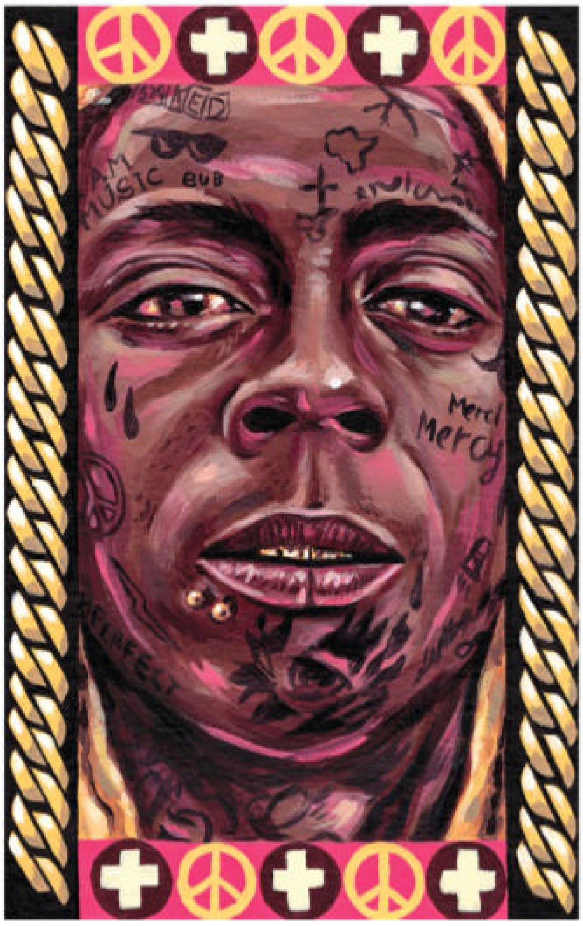


ILLUSTRATION BY SADDO

Rapping is **Lil Wayne's** life's work, in a way that seems all-encompassing; there are other careerists, but few are as passionate. He was loitering in the Cash Money Records offices at eight, signed at fourteen, and he has been single-mindedly prolific and diligent ever since. Rap is, for some, a gateway to acting or entrepreneurship, but Wayne, now forty, has never wavered from his path. This manifests in his work: his verses are dense, spiralling, and seemingly endless, as if he might go on forever for the sheer love of the craft, but they also have the limit-testing energy of a trick-shot compilation. On April 16, Wayne, the self-anointed "best rapper alive," field-tests his theory, at the Apollo Theatre, as part of his "Welcome to tha Carter" tour.—*Sheldon Pearce* to a space station: a haven for the wealthy, spinning just beyond the limits of our polluted planet, and clearly related to the elegant wheel that turned in "2001: A Space Odyssey." Our hero is Max (Matt Damon), who, like the majority of humans, toils and sweats on Earth, where the cops are hostile robots. After an accident at work, and with nothing to lose, he takes on the reckless task of assailing an evil billionaire (William Fichtner) and winds up on a shuttle to Elysium, hellbent on reaching this artificial heaven and obtaining justice. Politically, the movie flames with insurrectionary fervor, but its most cogent virtue is one of texture; rather than viewing a future world from a distance and admiring its digital enhancements, we feel thrust into the thick of it with such immediacy and sensory impact that, like most of its inhabitants, we can only dream of escape. With Jodie Foster, miscast as a frosty villainess, and Sharlto Copley, well cast as a maniacal rogue.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 8/19/13.) (Streaming on Hulu, Prime Video, Apple TV, and other services.)*

The Queen of Versailles

In the real-life meltdown, both financial and personal, of David and Jacqueline Siegel—a Florida-based time-share baron and his wife, who started building a house that would have been the country's largest, and which, following the 2008 financial crisis, they couldn't complete—the documentary filmmaker Lauren Greenfield found a perfect storm of smoke-and-mirrors maneuvering and its blowback. David's company mastered the hard sell (a process that Greenfield records), getting people to buy houses that they often could ill afford; the company packaged its mortgages to banks, and when the music stopped it was left without cash flow. At the film's outset, Jacqueline is living large, hosting charity events and filling a house with seven children, myriad nannies, servants, and pets, and hauls from her relentless luxury shopping. During the downward economic spiral, David keeps her in the dark about his finances; the disclosure is part of the action. Yet the movie's apparent bombshell revelation is political: David asserts that he "personally" engineered George W. Bush's victory in Florida in 2000 through means that "may not necessarily have been legal." Released in 2012.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Pluto, Prime Video, Hulu, and other services.)*

Sunrise

For his Hollywood début, in 1927, the German director F. W. Murnau brought a slender story to life with a breathtaking display of technical ingenuity, creating one of the masterworks of the art form. The archetypal tale concerns a farmer (George O'Brien) caught in the erotic grip of his scheming urban mistress (Margaret Livingston). He takes his wife (Janet Gaynor) on a rowboat ride in order to do away with her, but he can't follow through; when they reach shore, the horrified innocent flees, and he penitently pursues her to a picturesque reconciliation in the big city. The astonishing visual transition of the broken couple's arrival, by trolley car, to the swarming metropolis is matched by the overwhelming design of the city itself; its mighty scenery, complete with streetcars, traffic jams, and a teeming amusement park, gives rise to vastly complex mise en scène and mercurial emotions. From a nearly absurd wisp of a premise, Murnau raises cinema to new speculative heights—and, at the same time, renders palpable the joy of his inventiveness, the miracle of the medium's power. Silent.—*R.B. (Screening April 15-16 at Museum of the Moving Image and streaming on Tubi, Freevee, and other services.)*

A Tale of Summer

This strangely rigid comedy by the then septuagenarian Éric Rohmer, from 1996, starts with a tensely lyrical sequence in which Gaspard (Melvil Poupaud), a young mathematician and aspiring musician, spends too much time alone while awaiting his girlfriend at a crowded Brittany resort town. There, Gaspard meets Margot (Amanda Langlet), a graduate student with whom he shares much but does not desire. For that, there's her friend Solène (Gwenaëlle Simon), an impulsive bank clerk, whose hold on him is challenged by the arrival of his girlfriend, Léna (Aurelia Nolin), an imperious bourgeoise with breezy manners that veil a tough, glossy sense of power. Despite the bright summer sun and the inviting seascapes, Rohmer's film is tight and airless; it's set in the present day, but the febrile formalities evoke a vanished age—that of the director's own prewar youth—in which worldly witticisms and ponderous aphorisms both conceal and deflect passion. Gaspard's providential confidence in his artistic dreams also harks back to Rohmer's formative years, as if the director had been waiting half a century for the artistry with which he could exorcise his memories of embarrassment, pain, and sexual frustration.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

SCREENING AND STREAMING

COURTESY ROB TREGENZA

Most low-budget independent films are scrappy and rough-hewn, but Rob Tregenza's first feature, **"Talking to Strangers,"** from 1988, displays a fluid virtuosity that Hollywood veterans might envy. (It screens at MOMA in a retrospective of his films which runs April 12-16; it's also streaming on Vimeo.) The movie comprises only nine shots, each approximately ten minutes long, all meticulously choreographed for actors and camera alike. Tregenza uses a crane as painters might use a brush; he crafts bold panoramas with ornamental gestures, whether in the streets of Baltimore, on a city bus, inside a confessional, at an art studio, amid a busy bank branch, or aboard a water taxi. With these grand-scale intricacies, he depicts the struggles of a young writer named Jesse (Ken Gruz), who is painfully lonely and intellectually troubled. Jesse's efforts at human connection are contentiously spiked with his philosophical despair, and in his random encounters in tight spaces he confronts emotional, physical, and sexual violence. Tregenza imbues the film's heightened realism (and its dialogue) with a religious bent: he evokes a fallen world in which vain strivings take many forms, from the openly brutal to the presumptuously refined.—*Richard Brody*

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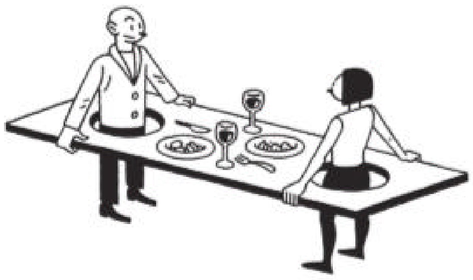

TABLES FOR TWO

Chalong
749 Ninth Ave.

I tend to be skeptical about the inclusion of oysters in an elaborate dish, given how complex and complete the bivalves are on their own, barely seasoned and sitting in their shells; it feels somehow wrong to remove them for anything other than immediate slurping. As such, I skipped the Lumpu Salad the first two times I ate at Chalong, a new southern-Thai restaurant in Hell's Kitchen. On my third visit, I wised up. A cluster of milky-looking oysters (usually from the East Coast) are dressed in chili paste, spooned into a pool of seafood sauce (made with green chili, cilantro, garlic, lime juice, fish sauce, and sugar), piled high with fried shallot, raw red onion, fresh mint, cilantro, and Thai bird chili, and finished with a frilly tangle of tender, curling pea shoots and a few coins of radish. It was spectacular: sour, sweet, briny, refreshing—the cool, creamy, slippery oysters playing foil to the sharp heat of the sauce and the crisp herbs and vegetables.

The salad is one of a half-dozen appetizers currently on offer at Chalong, which was opened in January by the chef Nate Limwong—who grew up in Surat Thani, on the coast of southern Thailand—and a group of her colleagues from previous jobs at restaurants including Fish Cheeks and Soothr. Each dish is a standout—on the menu, in the neighborhood (which has been home to dozens of other Thai restaurants), and in the city at large.

I've never had anything quite like Baerng Golae, a dish featuring traditional coconut crisps known as *kanom baerng*—cookies, essentially, made from batter (flour, egg, coconut milk) flattened by a hot iron that imprints a delicate floral pattern. The salty, sweet wafers are folded while still warm and pliable, taking on the shape of a taco shell as they cool, becoming receptacles for soft, juicy grilled shrimp, both marinated in and topped with *golae*, a southern-Thai-style paste of fifteen spices, including cumin, ginger, cassia, and star anise.

"Puff sticks," made from painstakingly laminated vegan pastry wrapped around grated coconut, provide an equally thrilling sweet-and-savory roller coaster, seasoned with makrut lime, black pepper, garlic, and cilantro. For Jor Pu, fried tofu skin, gold and glistening, is stuffed with crabmeat, shrimp, and pork, a sort of dumpling extraordinaire, to be dipped in plum sauce. Hiding in another salad, made with either supremed pomelo or chunks of slightly tart, crunchy star fruit, are flakes of branzino, cured overnight in fish sauce and sugar and then deep-fried.

This branzino also appears in an entrée called Khao Yum, to be tossed with piles of jasmine rice, a super-funky crab-roe relish, sprouted mung beans, chili, and thinly shaved lemongrass. A rich coconut-based crab curry is made exceptional with the inclusion of both jumbo lump meat and half a deep-fried soft-shell crab. The Hor-Mok, a loaf of flaked sea bass and fiery curry paste, wrapped snugly in a banana leaf, goes custardy as it steams on the grill.

Limwong's focus is on seafood—emphasized by the tastefully beachy décor—but the chef is just as adept with meat. Her skill is perhaps best exemplified by the pork spareribs in curry, which are both braised and fried, and taste as if they've been engineered to release their flavors in succession instead of all at once, like Willy Wonka's three-course-dinner chewing gum—a clanging note of makrut lime followed by a slowly building heat.

Yet my favorite dish, the Lon Tao Jiew, retired for the season but due to return in the fall, was vegan: a cornucopia of raw cucumber, radish, and enormous, fragrant, peppery betel leaves arranged around a bowl of warm silken tofu sweetened with coconut milk and deepened in flavor by a fermented yellow soybean relish. On a spoon the tofu held its shape, but on the tongue it seemed to melt away, urging me back for more. *(Entrées $18-$32.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*

PHOTOGRAPH BY RANA DUZYOL FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
ON TRIAL ON THE TRAIL

On December 15, 2015, Donald Trump and eight other Republicans contending for their party's Presidential nomination met for their fifth debate, in Las Vegas. Trump set the tone, both with his bullying of Jeb Bush and in the discussion of his call, a week earlier, for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." Rather than recoiling, his opponents tended to express understanding for Trump's perspective, while claiming they'd be more effective: Ted Cruz wanted a narrower ban; Ben Carson wanted government surveillance of mosques and supermarkets; Carly Fiorina wanted private companies to help with the spying. Rand Paul managed to warn people who supported Trump, "Think—do you believe in the Constitution?" Five years later, Paul was insinuating that Democrats had stolen the 2020 election from Trump.

On December 4, 2023, Trump is due to be in a courtroom in Manhattan, for a pretrial hearing in the criminal case that Alvin Bragg, the New York County District Attorney, has brought against him on thirty-four counts of falsifying business records in the first degree—a felony. Trump will also likely be preparing for what will be the fifth G.O.P. debate of this Presidential cycle, at a venue to be determined. The Republican National Committee recently announced that the first debate will take place in August, in Milwaukee. The exact date has not been set, but the R.N.C. might note that Judge Juan Merchan, who is presiding over Trump's case, has given his lawyers until August 8th to file preliminary motions, which could include such matters as a request for a change of venue or for a dismissal.

Milwaukee was chosen because the Party's Convention will be in that city. Wisconsin went narrowly for Trump in 2016, and for Biden in 2020, and both parties have invested heavily in races there, most recently for the state Supreme Court. (The Democrat, Janet Protasiewicz, won decisively; abortion and redistricting were central issues.) In picking the other debate sites, the R.N.C. may now have to consider how logistically convenient it is for Trump to travel from the courthouse to the stage—and how politically convenient, or disastrous, it will be for the other candidates to be asked about the proceedings.

Trump, in other words, must operate with two calendars in mind—the court's and the campaign's—and so must much of the machinery of American politics. At his arraignment, on April 4th, prosecutors indicated that a trial wouldn't begin until early next year; a number of Republican primaries will be in February. Should a judge, say, reschedule jury selection to account for them? The complexity will multiply if, as expected, Fani Willis, the D.A. for Fulton County, Georgia, brings charges related to Trump's efforts to overturn the state's election results, and if Jack Smith, the special counsel, does so in connection with either Trump's actions ahead of the January 6th assault on the Capitol or his handling of government documents, or both. Those investigations might have their hearing calendars crowded by the one in New York. That would be unfortunate, as Bragg's case is, by many measures, the flimsiest of them.

The indictment principally addresses the payment of a hundred and thirty thousand dollars, in October of 2016, to Stormy Daniels, an adult-movie star, allegedly for her silence about a consensual sexual encounter; such a payment is, in itself, not illegal. In contrast, the Georgia case involves the alleged procurement of fraudulent ballots and a phony certificate for the state's sixteen electoral votes, which is most definitely illegal. (Trump denies any wrongdoing.) Bragg has charged that Trump had his lawyer Michael Cohen front the money for Daniels and then reimbursed him, in eleven payments, in a way that created thirty-four false business records (checks, invoices, ledger entries). Each might be a misdemeanor;

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

what would make them a felony is an intent to defraud and commit or conceal another crime. Bragg has chosen not to specify what that other crime is yet, either in the indictment or in an accompanying "statement of facts," other than to suggest that it has something to do with elections, or maybe taxes—maybe federal, maybe state, maybe an untested hybrid. (The underlying records case is also less tight than expected.) Ruth Marcus, in the Washington *Post*, detected "a certain circularity" in the linkages; she called the indictment "disturbingly unilluminating."

It may seem unfair that voters didn't get to know about Daniels before the election, but withholding a candidate's marital infidelities is not criminal election fraud. Bragg's job as a prosecutor is to pull a legally recognizable charge from a haze of crookedness, and so far he has not done so. This omission is distinctly damaging when a good part of the country thinks that the case is a setup. Even if Bragg wins a conviction—his case could get stronger—or another prosecutor does, there will likely be years of appeals ahead, with more hearings to schedule and conflicting dates to consider. One could be Inauguration Day. A felony conviction—even thirty-four of them—does not disqualify Trump or anyone else from running for President. In 1920, Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist candidate, heard the election results while in federal prison; he had been convicted under the Espionage Act for speaking against the First World War. (His supporters printed badges with a picture of Debs in prison clothing; Trump, in a farcical echo, is selling T-shirts with a fake mug shot.)

Judge Merchan and his colleagues in other jurisdictions will have to make calls, too, about how to reasonably accommodate the electoral process. Profound constitutional issues come into play, as Merchan recognized in the arraignment hearing. After prosecutors raised the issue of derogatory and possibly threatening statements that Trump had made about Bragg and about the judge, Merchan said that he would not impose a gag order—at least, not yet. "Such restraints are the most serious and least tolerable on First Amendment rights," he said, using the language of a 1976 Supreme Court decision. "That does apply doubly to Mr. Trump, because he is a candidate for the Presidency of the United States."

Merchan's observation is, in a way, as much about the voters' rights as it is about Trump's. Candidacy does not confer impunity. But Trump will not be the last politician to be indicted by a prosecutor from an opposing political party, and this case may well set standards with which the country as a whole will have to live.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

BLIND JUSTICE DEPT.

UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS

At a glance, it was a fairly representative docket at Manhattan's Criminal Courthouse, on Centre Street. Defendant D., male, thirty-four, charged with menacing and aggravated harassment. Defendant B., female, thirty-four, criminal obstruction of breathing or blood circulation. Defendant H., female, twenty-two, assault in the second degree. Defendant P., male, forty, sexual abuse in the first. D.W.I. Petit larceny. Criminal mischief. Theft of services. A grocery deliveryman alleged to have kicked someone in the back, for unknown reasons: released on his own recognizance. Tara Sukhu, the arraignment supervisor with the Legal Aid Society, said, over the phone, "It's been pretty quiet. So far, so good."

Outside the seventeen-story building, it was anything but quiet. Helicopters hovered. Whistles and clanging persisted amid sign-waving and costume-flaunting behind police barricades: a parade with nowhere to go. Representative George Santos, no stranger to masquerades, fled the scene quickly, declaring it "unbearable." Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene brought a megaphone but soon retreated to her S.U.V., where she invoked the famous scofflaws Jesus and Mandela. The unsealing of an unprecedented indictment was imminent: "From approximately June 2015 to November 2016, the Defendant was a candidate for the office of President of the United States. On January 20, 2017, he became President." That would be Defendant T., male, seventy-six, charged with falsifying business records in the first degree.

Setting aside the politics (good or bad for '24?) and the optics (observers likened the Palm Beach airport stakeout to the pursuit of O.J.'s white Bronco), the nature of Donald Trump's alleged crimes was old, if tawdry, news. Hush money, improperly classified. Or, in legalese, "The purpose of the payment was to avoid negative attention to the defendant's campaign by suppressing information about an allegedly sexual encounter between defendant and an adult-film actress." That was an Assistant District Attorney speaking, up in the rarefied air of the fifteenth floor, which had been reserved for the day's most prominently accused, as a safety precaution. Unlike the other defendants, who stood, often cuffed, before a judge in Room 130, down near the metal detectors, the man from Mar-a-Lago was free to sit, fidget, and admire the starched cuffs of his lawyers' shirts.

Tempting as it may have been to imagine a kind of upstairs-downstairs dichotomy, an eavesdropper with his eyes closed could have identified a fair amount of thematic convergence in the proceedings of Trump's arraignment and that of, say, a man with an outstanding warrant in Suffolk County who was said to have erupted in violence when a woman refused to show him the contents of her phone. A lot boils down to logistics.

Upstairs: "I am just stating the obvious that having President Trump in this courtroom today is extraordinarily burdensome."

Downstairs: "He simply could not get to Long Island. He would be eager for supervised release."

Upstairs: "I expect all other defendants to appear in court, even high-profile defendants."

Downstairs: "There are trains and buses in Suffolk County, counsel. There is a bus that goes directly to the courthouse."

Upstairs: "I was not suggesting President Trump does not want to be here."

Downstairs: "Defendant has clear disregard of court orders."

Upstairs: "This defendant has made . . . irresponsible social-media posts that target various individuals involved in this matter, and even their families."

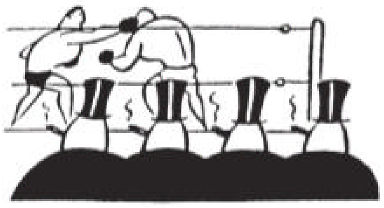
Downstairs: "You are to have no contact by phone, by text message, through social media, do you understand?"

Upstairs: "I never met Stormy Daniels. I never spoke to Stormy Daniels." Oops. Not Trump there, believe it or not, but Joseph Tacopina, a.k.a. Joey Taco, seated at Trump's left, and sounding less like a lawyer than like a guilty husband. He was denying that he had a prior association with the adult-film actress that could pose a conflict. The courthouse has a way of visiting indignities on all but the robed.

Trump, released on his own unmistakable recognizance, isn't due back at Centre Street until December. In the meantime, he faces looming investigations in Georgia and in Washington, involving more substantive concerns, like election interference and insurrection. Trial handicappers, left to pore over the D.A.'s narrative account in the Statement of Facts, would do well to consider that, even with the briefest of arraignments, narratives can diverge. Take the case of a Defendant R., who arrived in handcuffs an hour after Trump's departure, with hair similarly aloft. According to the prosecutor, who asked that bail be set at ten thousand dollars, he was an incorrigible thief, a thirteen-time recidivist. He had even robbed one victim on three separate occasions! Enter the public defender: "The amount of bail is extortionate for a client who is homeless and stealing paper towels." The repeat victim was a Target. "Stay out of that store!" the judge admonished, while declining to set bail. Uncuffed and released—until next time.

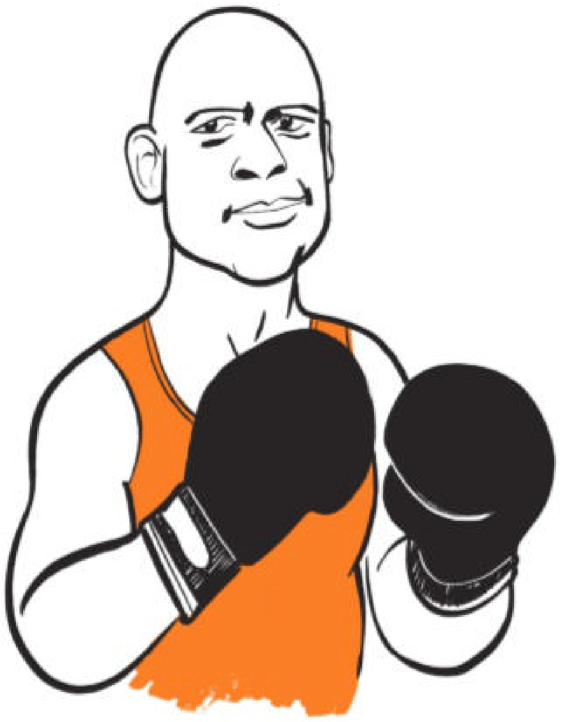
—*Ben McGrath*

DEPT. OF PREPARATION
BOX AT THE OPERA



When the bass-baritone Speedo Green is in town, from Vienna, he likes to visit the Life Time fitness club in Hell's Kitchen to shoot some hoops. "I'm the world's worst basketball player," he said, passing by the court recently. "I actually met Russell Westbrook here. He was a huge dick to me! I was getting my butt handed to me by a fifteen-year-old, and Russell walked in. I had my Lakers hat, and I asked if he would sign it. He just said, 'No,' and he proceeded to watch me for fifteen minutes as I missed every shot I took. Then I got kicked out because Lebron was coming."

For the past six months, Green has been visiting the gym a few times a week. No basketball; he's in fight training. Green is starring as Emile Griffith, a bisexual milliner turned prizefighter, in Terence Blanchard's boxing opera, "Champion," which opens at Lincoln Center this week. To get in shape, Green has cut a hundred pounds from his peak weight, but boxing-opera training is more luxurious than Rocky's meat freezer. Life Time has a rooftop pool and a Kusama pumpkin out front.



Speedo Green

Green found some space near the free weights. He wore a muscle tee, boxing trunks, and size-15 shoes. He was two days off a performance with the Met Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, a day off the Super Bowl, and still giddy from both; he wore a Chiefs hat. "I did have a lot of chicken wings last night," he reported.

Green and Blanchard wanted the boxing scenes to feel real. "Terence knows more about boxing than people can imagine," Green said. (Blanchard has been known to spar with Michael Bentt, a former heavyweight champion.) Opera and sports have mixed some through the years—Lou Gehrig liked to watch "Tristan und Isolde" and cry, and John Philip Sousa scored an opera piece called "The Umpire and the Dude"—but not much. This was a chance to attract a new audience. "My entire career has been about breaking people's preconceptions," Green said.

Green, who is thirty-seven, grew up in a trailer park in Virginia. His given name is Ryan. "Speedo is my real middle name," he said. "My dad was an amateur bodybuilder. And so as a joke on April Fool's Day"—Green was born on April 1st—"he named me after his favorite underwear." Green was abused as a kid, and he could be violent; he spent time in juvenile detention for threatening to kill his mother. He discovered opera at fourteen—"Carmen," on a field trip to the Met—and his life changed. A couple years ago, he found himself in seven shows at the Met at roughly the same time, singing in English, Russian, Italian, German. "It blew up my career," he said. "Champion" is his first leading role.

He began wrapping his hands like the pros do. "I sat at home for three weeks wrapping and unwrapping," he said. "It's become therapeutic." His trainer, Joseph Witherspoon, grabbed some pads, and the two men circled each other.

They worked in rounds: jabs, combos, weaves. "People think that punching is the hard part of boxing," Green said. "It's actually the footwork."

"One day, I'm gonna take him out dancing," Witherspoon said. "It'll actually help his boxing. But Speedo is convinced he's the worst dancer in the world."

"You don't want to do that, man," Green said. "I'll watch, though."

In the final round, Green worked on more baroque combos—uppercut, hook, hook, weave. He stung the pads with a satisfying smack. Afterward, he raised a gloved hand. "My thumb is up!" Green said. "You can't see it."

Witherspoon looked pleased. "Honestly, he's scary as fuck right now," he said.

Green got changed, and they headed to a coffee shop. Green ordered a mocha latte with almond milk. ("Can I get it extra hot, like scalding-sun, burn-the-inside-of-my-body kind of hot? Thank you.") He and Witherspoon discussed the similarities of their trades. "Any singer will tell you it's a sport," Green said. Last year, he performed Escamillo in "Carmen," at the Kennedy Center. During a duel scene ("a super, super ballsy French duet"), he and the tenor Michael Fabiano found themselves tacitly competing during a long fermata—high G for Green, B-flat for Fabiano. "The first night, because he's a tenor and he's phenomenal, I couldn't hold it as long, and he kept going," Green said. "He was, like, See, I gotcha." Green started game-planning. "I'll never forget, it was the fourth performance. I was in the sweetest spot ever, vocally."

Someone in the audience had recorded the duet. Green took out his phone to play it and closed his eyes. "Pavarotti, he had Michael Jordan-esque moments," he said. "Those are super rare. I had one moment that lasted five seconds. But I know what it feels like."

—*Zach Helfand*

NEW FACES DEPT.
CLUBBUBBLE

Ever since New Yorkers learned that Mayor Eric Adams's nighttime whereabouts centered on the downtown members' club Zero Bond—this is, in fact, one of the few things that the public knows for sure about the Mayor's nighttime whereabouts—interest in the city's private-club scene has experienced a flummoxed renaissance. On the one hand, the old metropolitan dreams of sophistication and fellowship beckon, dressed up, perhaps, with a roof pool. On the other are the anxieties of becoming someone who joins clubs. The Old Guard clubs might show some starch and tarnish; the younger ones run loud, crowded, and warm. Where to turn? Dilemmas of this kind give the city's privileged neurotics something new to fret over.

David Litwak, a thirty-five-year-old tech entrepreneur, spent the other Thursday evening tossing wads of Tollhouse cookie dough onto a baking sheet while members of Maxwell, a club that he co-founded, wandered in from Watts Street, looking famished. Most private clubs have bartenders and chefs. At Maxwell, members can do the work themselves. The club is designed around an open kitchen hung with copper pots; members invite friends, and then cook dinner for them. Each has a wooden locker in which to keep personal liquor bottles, for the mixing of personal drinks. "There's a false notion that if you're super-wealthy you want to be waited on all the time," Litwak said. "I know a lot of people who enjoy the ultimate ability to bring their friends over and pour a drink for them." Isn't that what New Yorkers already do in their apartments? "The product is the people," Litwak said.

The club was named after the gossip columnist Elsa Maxwell, who died in 1963. "She was known for getting together Einstein, Charlie Chaplin, and Marilyn Monroe at the same dinner table," Litwak said. Something like that is the goal of the new club, too. Elsa Maxwell often started her dinners with dessert (hence the cookies) and ran scavenger hunts in the Bois de Boulogne.

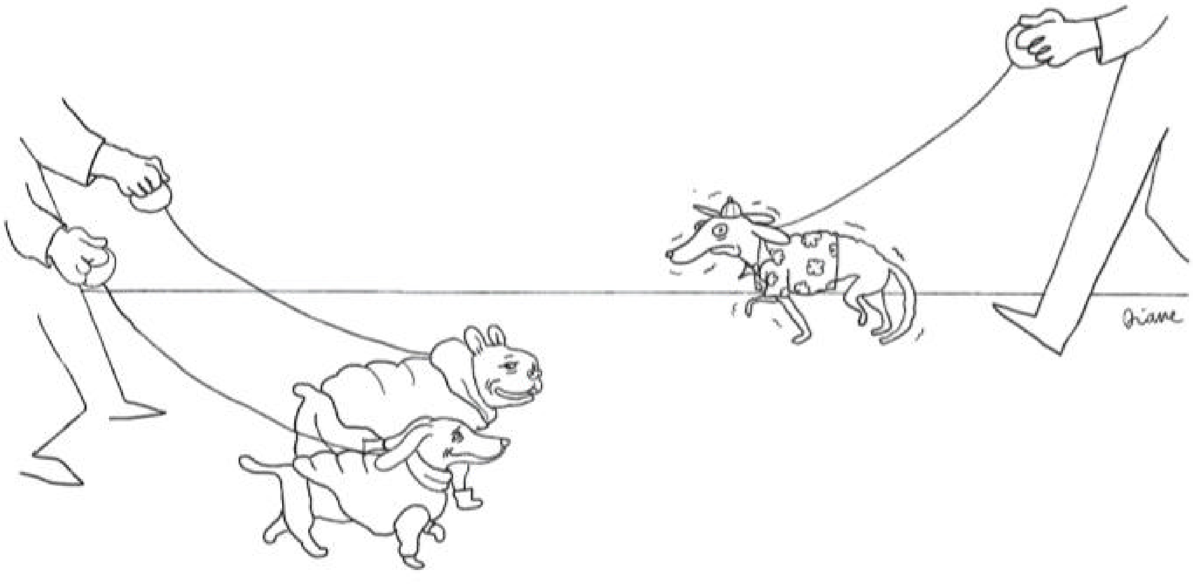
"That's in the Paris section up there," Litwak said, pointing to a picaresque mural on the dining-room wall depicting the columnist's exploits. It adjoined an ornate tiled hearth, shelves of books arranged by color, and a panel of stained glass. "There's this trend toward everything being white Scandinavian minimalism, but we're the opposite," he said. Another room, with a wet bar, had been hung with trellises, vines, and peacock wallpaper. ("Ninety-five per cent of what you see, from the paint to the carpets, is sponsored," another co-founder, Joelle Fuchs, who has a background in real estate, said.) Downstairs, in what Litwak called a "man-cave-she-shack" and Fuchs called a "speakeasy," a scarlet billiards table accompanied a row of sinks.

"Why *does* everyone hang out in the bathrooms or the kitchen at a house party?" Litwak asked. "That's why we turned this area into a"—he paused philosophically—"a bathroom-themed scenario." Nearby, a copper tub brimmed with lukewarm cans of JuneShine beer.

The man-cave-she-shack-speakeasy-bathroom is where the club's lockers are. Securing one—the buy-in for members—typically costs between seven and twelve thousand dollars. Beyond that, dues are two hundred and fifty dollars a month. There are "scholarships" for less affluent members. (These fortunates get a shared cupboard.) "We want people who are more stable in their lives," Litwak said. Maxwell has about a hundred members; when it opens officially, next week, the founders hope to gain six hundred more.

Kyle Chaning-Pearce, a buff New Zealander who is the club's third co-founder, arrived for dinner and drifted, listening to bits of conversation. He'd met Litwak at U.C. Berkeley.

"It's easy to stay in your comfort zone, and this is really good at pushing me outside," Pete Niehaus, a member who works at an investment firm, told a guest who was being recruited—one of the things Niehaus had invested in was the club. "You have dinners like this where you sit next to someone who's doing something *totally* different," he said.



"Someone didn't check the weather forecast today."

“It reminds me of the finals clubs in college,” the guest said. She works in the distant field of corporate telecoms.

David Ulevitch, a venture capitalist, said, “The reason I live in New York is that the people here are the best in every category. I already know the geniuses in the tech world. Now I want to meet the geniuses in the other areas!”

The meal, catered by Ruby’s, included pesto noodles, sweet-potato fries, and cheeseburgers. When Chaning-Pearce asked everybody to tell an interesting fact about themselves, a man wearing an embroidered golf belt described getting stepped on by a horse while playing polo. A guest named Chris Yetter, an investor in cannabis and psychedelics, poured Château de la Maréchaude into a shot glass printed with the wrinkled face of Elsa Maxwell and said, “It’s like on a dating app—it helps you expand from seeing the same thirty people again and again.”

Litwak looked around with pleasure. “Most clubs get a bad rap,” he said, “because they’re exclusive in an élitist way. But you can be *curated*.” What was his job as a curator? “Our view is: choose better,” he said.

—*Nathan Heller*

PIVOT DEPT.

LAP-STEEL MAGNOLIA

At Webster Hall on a recent Saturday night, the rock band Larkin Poe was half an hour into a master class in massive guitar tone when Rebecca Lovell, who fronts the group, called out, “My big sis is going to preach now!” Megan Lovell stepped forward with a peculiar, wing-shaped instrument strapped awkwardly to her body at a perpendicular angle. The sermon would be preached on lap steel.

Earlier in the day, at Le Petit Cafe, in Carroll Gardens, the sisters traced their path to blues-heavy Southern rock. It began in Tennessee about thirty years ago, when Rebecca, age four, started singing harmony with Megan, six, and their sister Jessica, the oldest. “Our mother taught us to sing a chord,” Megan said. They had “blood harmony,” the sound of sibling voices in an almost supernatural vocal blend; “Blood Harmony” is also the title of the band’s latest album.

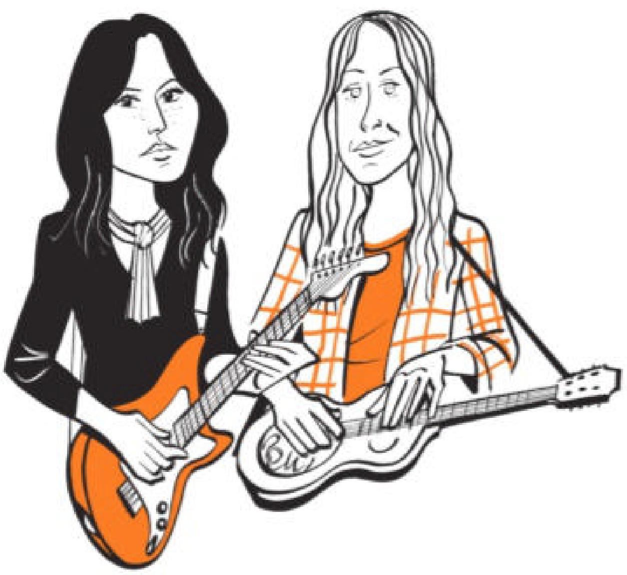
The sisters were classically trained, mostly on violin. After eight years of the Suzuki method, they attended a bluegrass festival. “The music just took our imagination by storm,” said Rebecca, who calls herself the family “motormouth.” They asked if they could please switch genres. Their parents said, “ ‘You’ve reaped the benefit of having discipline,’ ” Rebecca recalled. “ ‘If you want to pivot, that’s on you.’ ”

Rebecca picked up the mandolin, Megan learned the Dobro, and Jessica played fiddle. They called themselves the Lovell Sisters; “Jessica and the girls” was how they were known to friends. After winning a teen talent contest run by Garrison Keillor’s “A Prairie Home Companion,” they began playing bluegrass festivals. When Jessica left for college, they became just “the girls.”

“We wanted to do more than bluegrass, because we grew up with so much classic rock,” Rebecca said, sipping an oat-milk latte. Being homeschooled, the sisters were steeped in their parents’ eclectic music tastes. Rebecca ticked off a few: “Bach, Black Sabbath, the Carpenters, Allman Brothers, C.S.N.Y., Jerry Douglas, Yanni, Al Di Meola, the Windham Hill collection.” She added, “We wanted to plug into amps, which was really hard for us at first. We were just a string band.”

So Rebecca taught herself electric guitar and Megan took up the lap steel, which is played with a slide. Introduced to the U.S. by Hawaiian musicians around the turn of the twentieth century, the acoustic lap steel, with its plaintive sound, influenced both country pioneers like Jimmy Rodgers and early bottleneck bluesmen, most notably Son House, forming an early bridge between genres later segregated as “hillbilly” and “race” music. The first commercially produced guitar ever to be electrified was a lap steel known as “the frying pan.” But the instrument has since given way to the pedal steel, which allows players to change the pitch with foot levers.

“I realized this was the sound I’d been looking for my whole life,” Megan said.



Rebecca and Megan Lovell

But, instead of putting the instrument on her lap, she uses a custom-built frame that allows her to stand and move as she plays. “Not only is she having to play in pitch,” Rebecca said, “but she also has to position it against her body as she’s walking. If I bump into her, she’s going to miss her notes. Also, she can’t see her feet. There’s been times onstage where she’s tripped over shit.”

Megan’s first lap steel, a Rickenbacker, was made of heavy Bakelite. “My back was starting to kill me,” she said. She designed her own instrument, made of lightweight poplar: the Beard Electro-Liege, fabricated by Paul Beard.

The sisters strolled over to Retrofret, a vintage-guitar store. The shop’s resident historian, Peter Kohman, recognized them from the cover of *Vintage Guitar* magazine. “It’s usually old guys who play Les Pauls on the cover,” he said. “It’s cool to see young women.”

Megan tried several of the shop’s lap steels. A gothic wailing filled the store, swampy and thick with weird old roots music, vibrating between the sacred and the profane.

“You have the human voice,” Kohman said, nodding at Rebecca, “and the instrumental voice,” meaning Megan’s steel. “It’s like that B. B. King thing.” King often spoke of duetting with Lucille, as he called his guitar. “He called it ventriloquism,” Kohman continued. “She sings and then he sings. You have that same vibe.”

“It can be very coy and mysterious,” Rebecca said, of Megan’s playing. “But you get a sense of her fire when she digs in. Megan doesn’t fuck around. She will cut you if she needs to.”

—*John Seabrook*

LETTER FROM ITEN

A TRAGIC RUN

Why were two female running champions killed in Kenya's track capital?

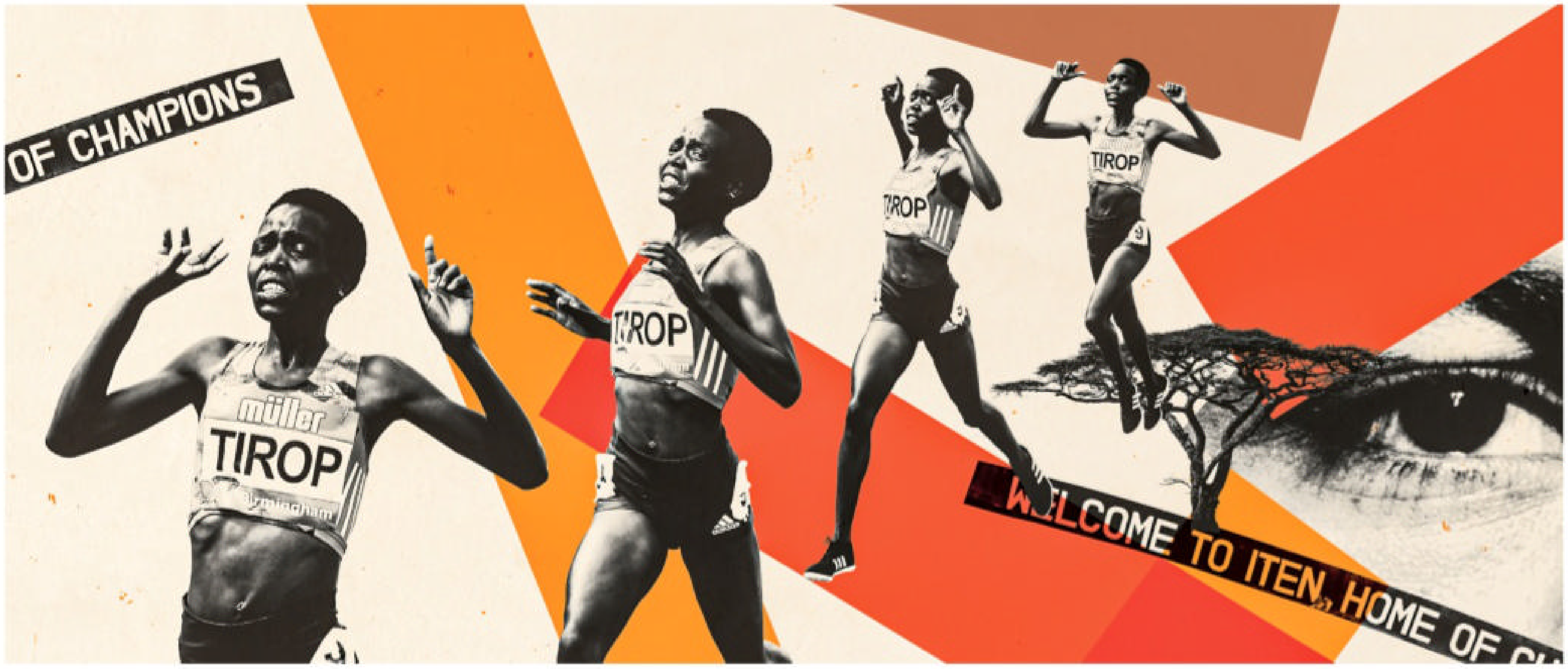
BY ALEXIS OKEOWO

When Agnes Tirop was eleven, she was already as fast as athletes twice her age. "She loved running, and she shined," her brother Martin told me. Tirop, who was born in 1995, was small-boned and delicate-featured, with cropped hair. Even as a child, she was self-possessed, with a singular focus on improving her speed. She grew up in the Kenyan village of Nandi, in the Great Rift Valley, a four-thousand-mile-long volcanic trench of steep escarpments, green hills, and soda lakes that is visible from space. She came from a big family. Her father, Vincent, had been a long-distance runner in his youth—as had her grandfather—but Vincent found it difficult to earn a living from the sport. Instead, each day he bought milk from local farmers and took it by bicycle to sell at the market in the city of Eldoret, twenty-nine miles away. The family waited, sometimes until midnight, for him to bring home food for them to eat. Despite having little money, Vincent saved five litres of milk every week for his children, so that they would have the nutrition they needed in order to train. "We were dirt poor," Martin said. "We started running because of poverty."

Several of the children showed an early aptitude for the sport, but it was clear that Tirop was special. She began training in primary school, running barefoot on the roads in her village. Joan Chelimo, who trained with Tirop, said that she always wanted to put on bouncy Kalenjin music before practice. "She was very young, and she was beating senior athletes," Chelimo said. At fifteen, Tirop won the five-thousand-metre race at a national junior competition. Later that year, she flew to South Africa for an international junior race, and came in second. When she returned home, her family threw her a party, serving meat and rice and playing music for hours. "It was her first time out of the country, and we felt very happy and proud," Vincent said. Tirop soon started giving some of her winnings to her family, so that they could build a house. "She paid for my school fees—and I'm older than her!" Martin said.

The Great Rift Valley in Kenya—and particularly a small town called Iten, two hours from Nandi—has become, by some measures, the running capital of the world. Iten, like many villages in the area, sits in the mountains, almost eight thousand feet above sea level, but you can descend four thousand feet into the valley by car within half an hour. Athletes there can "live high and train low," spending their non-training days at altitude so that their lungs become more efficient but running at a lower elevation, where the air is more oxygen-rich. Kenya has won more élite marathons than any other country in the past twenty years, and many of its winners have come from the Great Rift Valley. After Ibrahim Hussein, who was from Iten, became the first African to win the New York City Marathon, in 1987, the town's reputation was cemented. A sign above the main road welcomes visitors to the "home of champions." Kenya's best athletes now train in the area, including the world's most decorated living marathoner, Eliud Kipchoge. The Japanese, French, British, and Americans have sent runners to train there. "Iten is the nerve center," Vincent Onywera, who teaches exercise and sports science at Kenya College of Accountancy University, in Nairobi, told me.

When Tirop was in secondary school, she met a man named Ibrahim Rotich, who was about fifteen years older. Rotich was a big, charming man,



The Japanese, French, British, and Americans have sent runners to train in Iten. "Everybody runs here," an athlete said.

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCIERO

and he offered to manage and coach Tirop. Tirop already had a coach, and Rotich seemed, to Tirop's family, to have little formal experience, but Tirop accepted his offer. Tirop's sisters later observed Rotich driving her around, acting like her coach. Rotich stated recently that he "invested heavily" in preparing Tirop to "be the champion she was by supporting her athletics career and being by her side during training as her assistant and footing her medical bills." Daisy Jepkemei, Tirop's childhood best friend, told me that she was impressed by Rotich's dedication: "He was encouraging." In 2014, Tirop won the African Cross Country Championship, in Uganda. The next year, she won the World Athletics Cross Country Championships, in China—the youngest winner of that race in thirty years. "I had no fear," she said, at the time. "I was just trying to run my own race."

Tirop soon dropped out of school. Her parents protested, suspecting that Rotich was to blame. Tirop loved studying languages, especially Kiswahili. "She was almost finished with secondary school," Martin told me. The family complained to local authorities that she had left school without their permission, but Rotich and Tirop fled town, eventually moving to Iten. Nahashon Kibon, Tirop's first coach, warned her about becoming romantically involved with Rotich; this upset Tirop, and she and Kibon went their separate ways. "She was not happy with me," he said. She began running at a training camp in Iten. In 2016, she and Rotich married in secret, according to court documents. Rotich discouraged her from talking to her parents. Martha Akello, another runner, who lived next door to the couple in Iten, was disturbed by Rotich's controlling behavior. She told me that the couple shared a phone. "We were neighbors, but he did not permit her to mingle with the other ladies," she said. "He had to accompany her to training. It's like she was living in prison."

In mid-2017, Tirop told Akello that she was pregnant. She seemed happy, and asked Akello for advice on how to balance motherhood with her running career. That fall, Akello learned that she was also pregnant. She was eager to share the news with Tirop, but when they met, Akello recalled, Tirop told her, "Unfortunately, I'm not pregnant anymore." According to Akello, Tirop said that she had wanted to keep the baby, but that Rotich, who depended on her earnings for his income, had forced her to get an abortion. (Tirop's other friends and family said that they had no knowledge of her pregnancy.) She told Akello that she regretted agreeing to the procedure and wished that Akello had been around when it happened. (A lawyer representing Rotich did not respond to repeated requests for comment; he hung up on me when I reached him by phone, and then blocked me.)

Tirop's friends and family began to worry that she was falling into a pattern that was disturbingly common among female runners in Iten. "The husbands expect them to bring home money," Njeri Migwi, the executive director of Usikimye, an advocacy group that focusses on gender-based violence, told me. "The minute they want certain levels of independence, the men abuse them." Around 2018, Tirop reconnected with her family. She had Martin work as her pacemaker. Rotich was always around. "I didn't have any power to separate them," Martin said.

One morning last October, I went to visit Brother Colm O'Connell, a missionary and a track coach from Ireland who has lived for five decades in a cottage at a Catholic school in Iten. O'Connell, who is portly, with white sideburns, first came to Kenya in 1976, to teach geography, but ended up coaching track at the school full time. Eventually, he started training athletes hoping to run professionally, and he has become one of the most celebrated coaches in the region. O'Connell occasionally trains foreign athletes, but he focusses primarily on local runners. He had coached David Rudisha, a two-time Olympic gold medallist and two-time world champion. It had rained the night before I visited, and the air was cool and wet. A small group of runners were gathering near O'Connell's home, stretching and jogging in place. "Have you guys got water, or are you O.K.?" O'Connell shouted. No one wanted water. He told me, "I don't want them complaining down in the valley."

Every morning in Iten, in the early hours, I saw people running: Kenyans and foreigners, men and women, with children not far behind. Some wore sneakers; others ran in sandals. "Everybody runs here," Viola Cheptoo, an Olympic distance runner, told me. One of the people training with O'Connell was from the United Kingdom. "He decided to jump in the deep end," O'Connell said. Another was a Kenyan American who ran for the University of Alabama. One of O'Connell's female runners also served in the military and had just been called back to her barracks. Several of the athletes had represented Kenya in major international competitions. The runners headed down the road, and O'Connell and I followed in his pickup truck. We drove past a market in a grassy field, then dipped into the valley, which is a mile deep and filled with golden fields of ripening maize.

Running is Kenya's most well-known pastime. Some of this national affinity might have biological roots. People in the Kalenjin ethnic group, and particularly those in the Nandi subgroup, who live in the Great Rift Valley, have developed—likely as a result of centuries at high elevation—deeper-than-average lung capacities, bigger and more numerous red blood cells (which transport oxygen to muscles), and lower body masses. Onywera told me that he has found similar traits in Ethiopian communities that also live in the Rift Valley. Many Kenyans consume a milk-rich diet, which is helpful in childhood development. "They also have psychological readiness—the mental belief that they are the best," Onywera said. The Kalenjin have a long tradition of competing in running, wrestling, and tug-of-war. In the nineteen-twenties, British missionaries encouraged Kalenjin men to join colonial running competitions as a way of distracting them from cattle raiding, political unrest, and potential rebellion. "They wanted to get them to focus on athletics," Lorna Kimaiyo, a former runner who is now writing a dissertation on the history of Kenyan female runners, told me. The King's African Rifles, a brutal colonial regiment that put down the Mau Mau rebellion, recruited Kalenjin men to compete in its athletic competitions.

Kenya won its first Olympic medal in track in 1964, the year after it gained independence from Britain. At that time, there was no official running league in Kenya; the telecommunications agency, the post office, the rail and port authorities, and the national airline operated leagues for their employees. Early talents came out of the military. (The Kenya Defense Forces still allows soldiers to take leave in order to race.) In the seventies, American universities began recruiting Kenyan runners, expanding access to formal training. Kenya won four Olympic gold medals in Seoul in 1988; three of the medallists were attending college in the United States. Shoe companies and talent agencies began offering sponsorships and contracts, making the sport more lucrative. Running was soon seen as the best way out of poverty in Kenya.

Young Kenyans who showed promise started coming to Iten to find coaches who would train them. "You have nothing else to do except run," Joan Jepkorir, an athlete from Iten, told me. Rudisha, who holds the world record in the eight-hundred-metre, moved to Iten in high school. He told me, "Even the girls were better than me." Training centers and guesthouses—many started by former champions—sprang up. "All of us were farmers, and all of a sudden we have people coming in with really huge amounts of money, winning races, getting millions," Jepkorir said. In a reversal of colonial dynamics, about half the British national team now trains at the High-Altitude Training Center, a vast complex started by a Kalenjin Olympian. Programs are competitive. O'Connell told me, "Out of almost fifty in our youth group, only about ten are really going to make it to the top and make a living out of the sport." Some choose to run for other countries instead. Some might take up other endurance sports, like cycling; in 1998, Kenya sent a skier, who first trained as a runner, to the Winter Olympics.

At first, only men ran competitively. But in 1984 the first Olympic women's marathon was held in Los Angeles. "Kenyan women started to dominate in the nineties, when they were being recruited by American universities," Kimaiyo said. Tegla Loroupe, a woman from the Great Rift Valley, won the New York marathon in 1994. But, when Kenyan women began to bring home significant prize money, they got a mixed reception. "They were not being celebrated in the Kalenjin community because of our patriarchal culture," Kimaiyo said. Some men resented their wives' independence. As O'Connell put it, "The lady is the breadwinner, the lady is the one who is known." Still, young women began coming to Iten in the hope of finding success. "Most of the athletes in Kenya, they finish their education possibly at the primary or high-school level, and they have nothing, so they say, 'I want to run,'" Jepkorir told me. "You pack your bags. You come to Iten. Your parents maybe give you just a hundred dollars to start your life. But you come to realize it's not enough. . . . You say, 'Shit, I'm broke. What do I do?' That is when the predators come."

In September, 2021, Tirop and a group of Kenyan runners travelled to the thousand-year-old German village of Herzogenaurach, in the Bavarian countryside. Herzogenaurach was the home town of the Dassler brothers, who, after a feud, founded the rival sneaker companies Adidas and Puma. Tirop was there to compete in the Adizero: Road to Records, organized by Adidas. By this time, she was one of the most successful runners in Kenya. In August, Tirop had competed in the five-thousand-metre race, at the Olympics in Tokyo, and taken fourth place. In Herzogenaurach, she competed in the ten-thousand-metre and finished in an astonishing thirty minutes and one second. She had broken the world record. At the end, Tirop—covered in sweat and wrapped in a huge Kenyan flag—said, "I'm so happy."

Before the trip, Tirop had asked Martin to meet her and their sister Eve on the road between Eldoret and Iten. Tirop told her siblings that she wanted to leave Rotich. She said that he had been spending her money at bars while she was away, and that she was tired of it. He had become convinced that Tirop was having an affair, perhaps with a childhood friend who was now an Olympian. (The friend denied that this was so, but said that Rotich had grown paranoid about his relationship with Tirop, and was harassing him.) Soon Rotich arrived in a rage, with two police officers. Rotich claimed that Tirop had stolen the car, and the family went to the police station to settle the matter. The officers realized who Tirop was, Martin said, and let her go. But, before they left, he recalled, a female officer warned her to be "very careful," because Rotich seemed dangerous.

Tirop went to stay with her parents. She told her siblings that Rotich had hit her. She told Martin that he had threatened to burn the house down if she left him. She had told others about Rotich's behavior, too. In 2021, she told Milcah Chemos, an athletes' representative from Athletics Kenya, which oversees the sport in the country, that Rotich had abused her. Chemos told me that she spoke to Tirop and Rotich. "She talked about the abuse, but at first she told me, 'Let me finish my competition first,'" Chemos said. "I told him not to do anything and wait for her to finish her competition. Then we would talk." Chemos seemed focussed on reconciling the couple, and on making sure that Tirop's training was not interrupted. Chemos insisted that she "didn't know the story fully," and that Tirop hadn't seemed ready to leave Rotich at the time. But Cheptoo, the Olympic distance runner, told me, "Every single time victims go to Athletics Kenya, they tell them to go sort out your own things in private, don't put your business out there." (A co-opted member of Athletics Kenya's executive committee said that he wasn't aware of Tirop's story, but contested the idea that the organization turns a blind eye to such reports. He said that Athletics Kenya is now investigating issues of abuse involving its athletes. When *The New Yorker* reached out to further clarify the organization's position, it did not respond.)

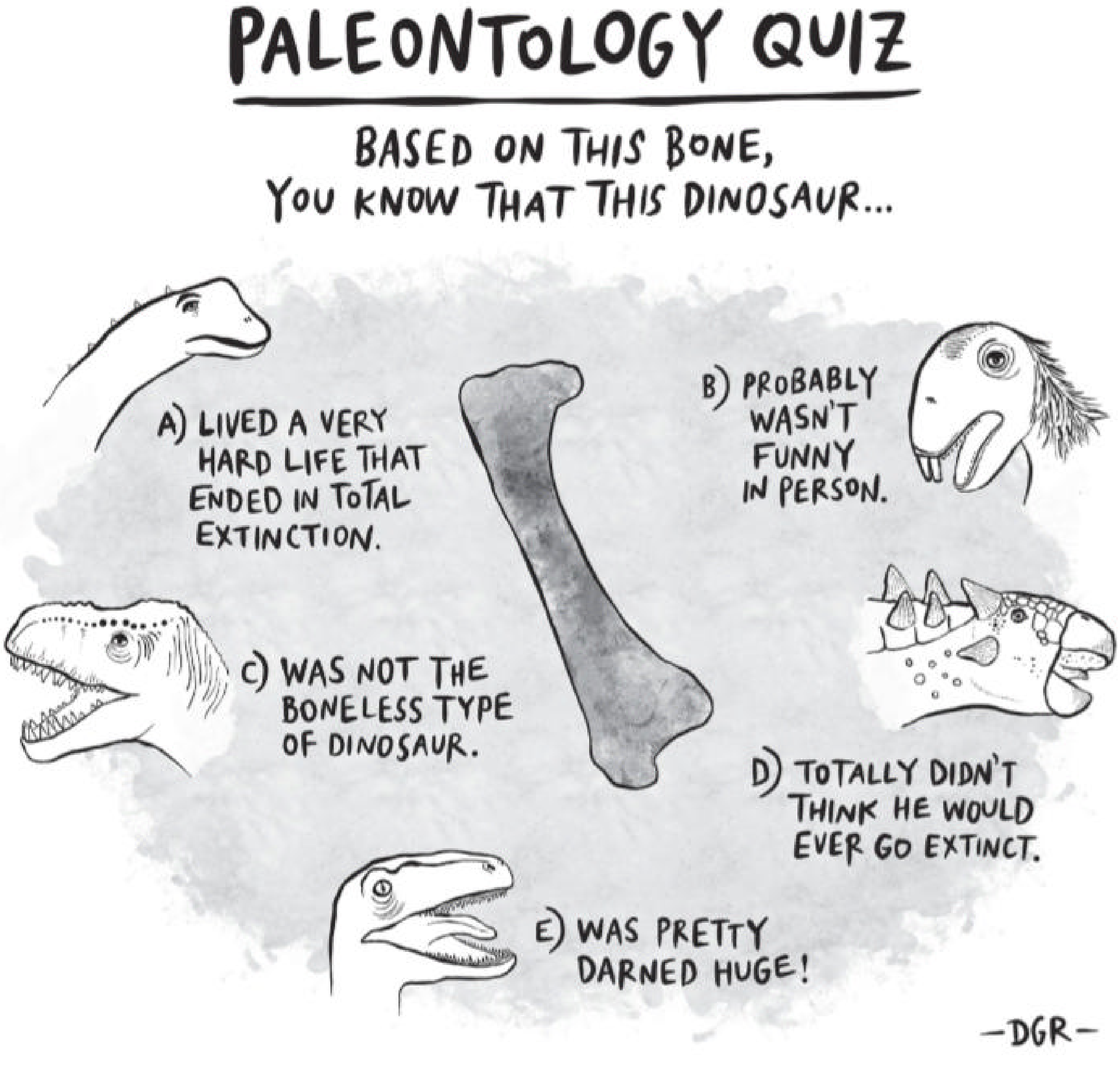
Before her trip to Herzogenaurach, Tirop went back to Iten to resume her training. She moved into a guesthouse at the training camp. "The first thing was to secure her," Joseph Cheromei, who managed the camp, told me. "There was a competition coming up." Cheromei said that he often saw his female runners being exploited by their partners. "I see it every day now," he said. "The athletes win a race, the man needs to own the earnings, the woman refuses, and the problem arises. It affects the ladies' performance." He tried to help keep the peace: "I go and reconcile them." In October, after the race in Germany, Rotich came to the camp, and Tirop agreed to go back home with him. Eve went with them, and spent the night in their spare room.

The next day, Rotich told Eve that he and Tirop were going to Nairobi for a competition. Eve had no choice but to leave. Later that day, though, she couldn't reach Tirop. Rotich picked up the phone and told Eve that she was not around. The next morning, Tirop was found stabbed and beaten to death in her home. Rotich had fled, leaving a note, reportedly confessing to the crime and saying that the relationship had been "full of fights." Police have said that they found a knife and a club at the scene. Rotich later admitted in an affidavit to killing Tirop, but pleaded not guilty to her murder, claiming that he was provoked into killing her because he believed she was having an affair with her childhood friend: "My late wife received a call which she put on speakerphone and had a very demeaning conversation about me with her lover which took me to the edge." (The childhood friend denied that this call took place, saying that he stopped speaking with Tirop because of Rotich's harassment.) After the killing, Rotich claimed that he "temporarily lost my mind and I kept driving aimlessly until I got [to] Mombasa." He was arrested the day after Tirop's body was found. According to Tirop's family and their lawyer, Rotich was listed as the owner of several of the couple's properties. (The lawyer would not make the deeds public because they have not yet been introduced in court.) Tirop's funeral was held on October 23rd, and was attended by more than a thousand people, including prominent athletes and Kenyan politicians. It would have been her twenty-sixth birthday.

Last fall, I visited the home that Tirop had shared with Rotich, a gray brick house with mauve trim and lime-green doors. A shed outside held her exercise equipment. "Her shoes are still here," Martin, who now lives there, told me. I went to her training camp. Cheromei was welcoming a group of Italian athletes; he has learned several European languages in order to work with the flood of international runners. Afterward, he took me on a tour, with Tirop's friend and fellow-runner Mary Keitany. Tirop's room at the camp was quiet, with a single bed under mosquito netting. "In America, when you have a boyfriend he can kill you or no?" she asked. I told her that there were laws that try to prevent this, but that domestic violence was still one of the leading causes of women being killed in the United States. "Like here in Kenya?" Keitany asked, surprised.

Tirop's abuse seemed to be an open secret. But Tirop's friends said that, by the time she competed in the Olympics, they had started to see a difference in her. She was wearing acrylic nails and red lipstick and plaiting her hair. She seemed to be gathering the confidence to finally leave Rotich. Ten days before her body was found, Tirop placed second at a race in Switzerland. Afterward, she had tea with some of the other athletes in Geneva. She asked Jepkorir why it was so much easier to divorce in Europe, and Jepkorir said that it was because women had more independence. "Then she said, 'I wish divorcing was easier in Kenya,'" Jepkorir told me. "I should have said something then."

When I arrived in Iten, I met up with several of Tirop's friends, most of whom were current runners. The women greeted one another happily, and asked after Chelimo's sister, who was pregnant. "When are we going to have *your* baby shower?" Chelimo teased Jepkorir. Keitany was travelling to New York the following week


PALEONTOLOGY QUIZ
BASED ON THIS BONE, YOU KNOW THAT THIS DINOSAUR...
A) LIVED A VERY HARD LIFE THAT ENDED IN TOTAL EXTINCTION.
B) PROBABLY WASN'T FUNNY IN PERSON.
C) WAS NOT THE BONELESS TYPE OF DINOSAUR.
D) TOTALLY DIDN'T THINK HE WOULD EVER GO EXTINCT.
E) WAS PRETTY DARNED HUGE!
-DGR-

to be honored for winning the New York marathon four times. The talk turned to Tirop. "She had a good spirit," Keitany said. After Tirop's death, her friends had started a WhatsApp group to express their pain, and to discuss what they could do to prevent further violence. Eventually, they formed an organization called Tirop's Angels, which aims to raise awareness about gender-based violence in Iten, and to offer resources for fighting it. "We want to see a change in this country, especially in our own communities," Cheptoo told me.

One in three women in Kenya has experienced gender-based violence, according to a survey released this year by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. Teen pregnancy and early marriage are common, and when women marry they traditionally have little power in the household; women own less than two per cent of the country's property in their names alone, the Kenya Land Alliance notes. Domestic violence is seen as a minor offense. "We still have cases of police stations turning away victims," Sarah Ochwada, a lawyer who handles domestic-violence cases involving athletes, told me in an e-mail. "Because communities view domestic disputes as family issues they try to convince victims to withdraw criminal complaints."

Many female runners come to Iten in search of an opportunity, and men, often with few real qualifications, offer to coach them. "The trend is that these young girls get into 'relationships' with older athletes or trainers who offer them protection against other predators," Ochwada said. "But over time, it's those same protectors who begin to abuse them." When female athletes begin to make money, their male partners control their winnings. Jepkorir, who works for a company that manages athletes, told me that husbands often have control of female runners' bank accounts. "This is normal to them," she said. Cheptoo has seen her teammates crying over the issue at races. "They say, 'My husband is yelling at me for not winning the race, he's threatening he'll beat me up when I get home.'" When women push back, partners lash out. "I don't think there's any woman who goes and asks for her money, and then nothing happens," Cheptoo said.

Tirop's Angels holds events at training camps, schools, and churches to raise awareness about domestic violence. The group has helped women leave abusive relationships and find housing. It has connected them with counsellors, provided them with food and clothing, and given them running shoes so that they can continue training. I went with members of Tirop's Angels to visit a girl they were working with who had fled her home after being abused by her father. They were raising money to pay for her food, medicine, and school fees. She told me, "I'm O.K. now. I'm back in school."

In October, 2021, the night before Tirop's death, a twenty-seven-year-old runner named Edith Muthoni, who lived east of Nairobi, was killed; her throat was slit with a machete. In 2014, Lucy Kabuu, another runner, was sued by her ex-husband for control of half of her properties. In the Kenyan newspaper the *Daily Nation*, Kabuu has argued that although some of the properties are in his name, she bought them all with her winnings; she has also accused him of stealing from her bank accounts and assaulting her. (Kabuu's ex-husband has denied the allegations, according to the *Daily Nation*, and argued that he contributed to the acquisition and development of several pieces of land. The case is ongoing.) This past February, the Olympic gold medallist Vivian Cheruiyot told another Kenyan paper, the *Standard*, that her husband, Moses Kiplagat, had taken control of her properties, including gas stations and farmland, and that, when she objected, he abused her physically and psychologically. (Kiplagat has denied the allegations, the *Standard* reported, and claimed that Cheruiyot was facing undisclosed social challenges.)

Many of Tirop's friends also knew another runner, Damaris Mutua, who had a high forehead and a bright smile, and grew up in a town south of Nairobi. "She loved to talk, and she loved gospel music," her sister Francisca told me. Mutua began running in primary school, and in 2010 she won a bronze medal for Kenya in the thousand-metre race at the Youth Olympics in Singapore. In 2022, Mutua moved to Iten to train. Later that year, she won second place in the Arab Cross Country Championships in Bahrain, and third place at the Luanda half marathon in Angola. When she returned from Luanda, she was in high spirits. Francisca recalled her saying, "I'll be bringing back gold next time."

When Mutua moved to Iten, she stayed with Akello, Tirop's friend, whom she had met at races in Morocco and France. The women hiked, watched movies, and shared clothes like sisters. "We used to plan," Akello said. "We had good goals—'One day we need to run in New York, we need to run in Frankfurt, run in London.'" Mutua had a husband named Felix Mwendwa Ngila, and they had a son, who was seven. Ngila worked as a security guard in Qatar, and Mutua rarely saw him. But, after a few months of living with Akello, Mutua told her that she was moving out because her husband was coming to visit. "I said, 'No problem,'" Akello told me. "But she lied to me."

In fact, Mutua wanted to move in with an Ethiopian runner named Eskinder Hailemaryam Folie, with whom she was having an affair. Folie was tall, with a narrow face and short curls. Jepkorir, who knew him as a fellow-runner, told me that he seemed like a "nice guy." Mutua and Folie had first met in 2021, at a bar, watching the Boston Marathon. Saleh Kiprotich, Folie's close friend, frequently visited him and Mutua at their home, where Folie cooked Ethiopian food. When Mutua travelled, Folie sometimes took care of her son.

But over time, according to Kiprotich, Folie became worried that Mutua was going to cheat on him. He would monitor her movements and ask Kiprotich to run errands for her so that she wouldn't have to leave the house. "He was so insecure and jealous," Kiprotich said. Folie eventually forbade Kiprotich and other male friends to visit the house when he wasn't there. In April, 2022, Mutua saw her husband during a layover in Qatar, which angered Folie. He told Kiprotich that he had spent money on Mutua for her gear, her training, and her son, but,

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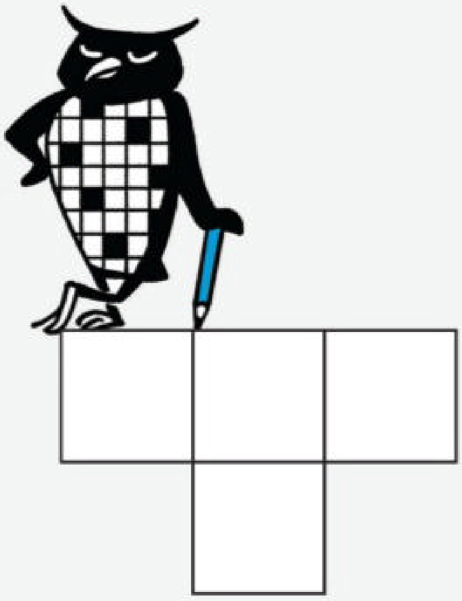

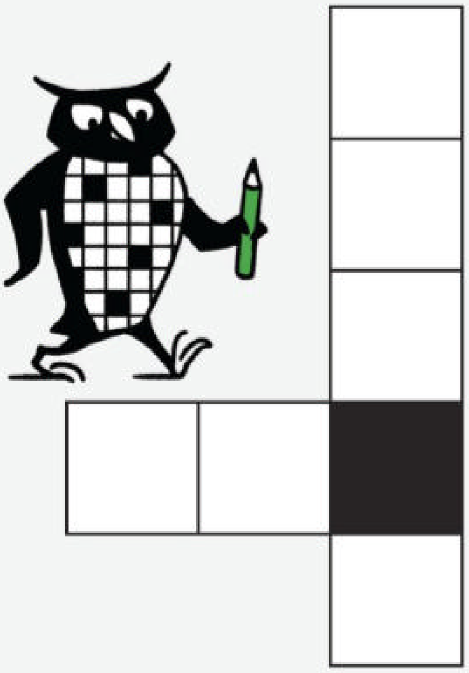

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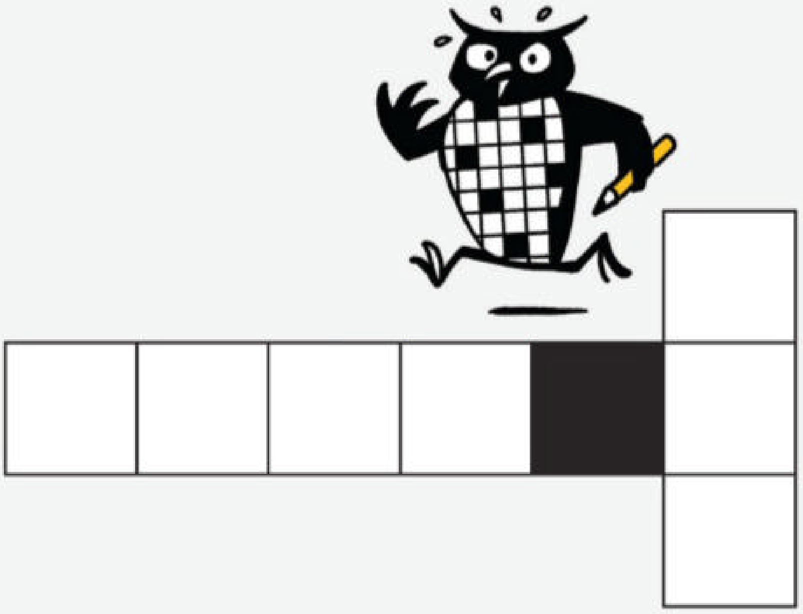

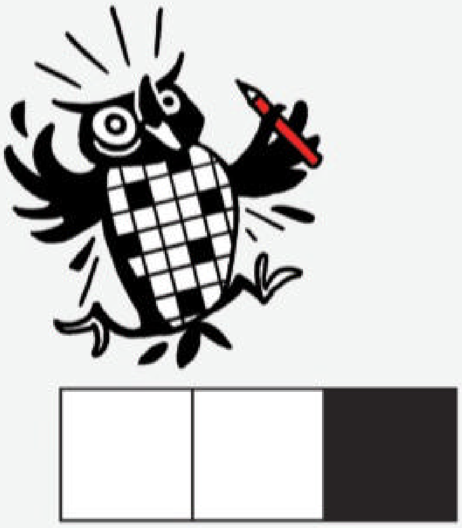

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now that she was winning races, she seemed less interested in him. "Men identify a lady who can run, then do everything for her, expecting that, when the lady becomes a star, he will be the one controlling the money," Kiprotich told me.

Later in April, Mutua's body was found on the bed in Folie's home. She had been strangled. According to the police, Folie confessed to a friend that he had killed her, then went into hiding, likely in Ethiopia. He is wanted for arrest. A week after the killing, Kiprotich said, he and Folie spoke on the phone, and Folie blamed the killing on Mutua's alleged lover. "I told him, 'You're lying,'" Kiprotich said. "Then he started saying that the lady had so many boyfriends that she was dating him and dating other guys at the same time. He told me, 'I've spent a lot of money on this girl.'" (Folie did not respond to repeated messages from me, and from Kiprotich on my behalf, asking for comment.) Ngila, Mutua's husband, was devastated. "The act was so inhuman," he said. Akello was still reeling from Tirop's death when she learned of Mutua's. "I should have never let her leave my place," she said. It was the second murder of an élite female runner in Iten within six months.

Recently, I met with Christine Muyanga and Purity Kalekye Mutui, two of Mutua's friends, at a runners' lodge in Iten. "The problem is that, if you compare the athletic careers of women and men, the women have more of a chance to succeed," Muyanga said. Women tended to take time off to get married or raise children, reducing the number of them who are competitive at any given time. For men who were struggling to distinguish themselves, athletic romantic partners could be a lifeline. "They want that money, and, at the end of the day, even your husband can kill you for it," Muyanga said. Mutua's death came just a few months after Tirop's Angels was formed. Cheptoo told me, "We'd been trying so hard to protect our sisters out there and call for the murders to stop, and it felt like the message was just falling on deaf ears." At the lodge, Muyanga and Mutui showed me photographs of their children, and said that they did not want them to become runners. "I tell the small athletes, 'If you have violence in your marriage, you have to sit down and share with your friends,'" Mutui told me. "If you stay silent, it can kill you."

The Saturday before I left Iten, Tirop's Angels held an event for women in the area at a local primary school. It was sunny but chilly, and the lawn was full of girls and women. Tirop's Angels put on loud Kalenjin music, and the audience, wrapped in *kikoy* blankets, got up and danced. The members of Tirop's Angels passed out brochures explaining the warning signs of domestic violence. A female doctor urged mothers to tell someone if their children were being abused. A few runners spoke about the violence they had experienced in their homes. Then Cheptoo took the microphone. "I think everybody knows what happened to Agnes," she said. "Most of us know that Agnes was killed by her husband. In our community, domestic fights are common. . . . Isn't it important for us to be talking with our daughters?"

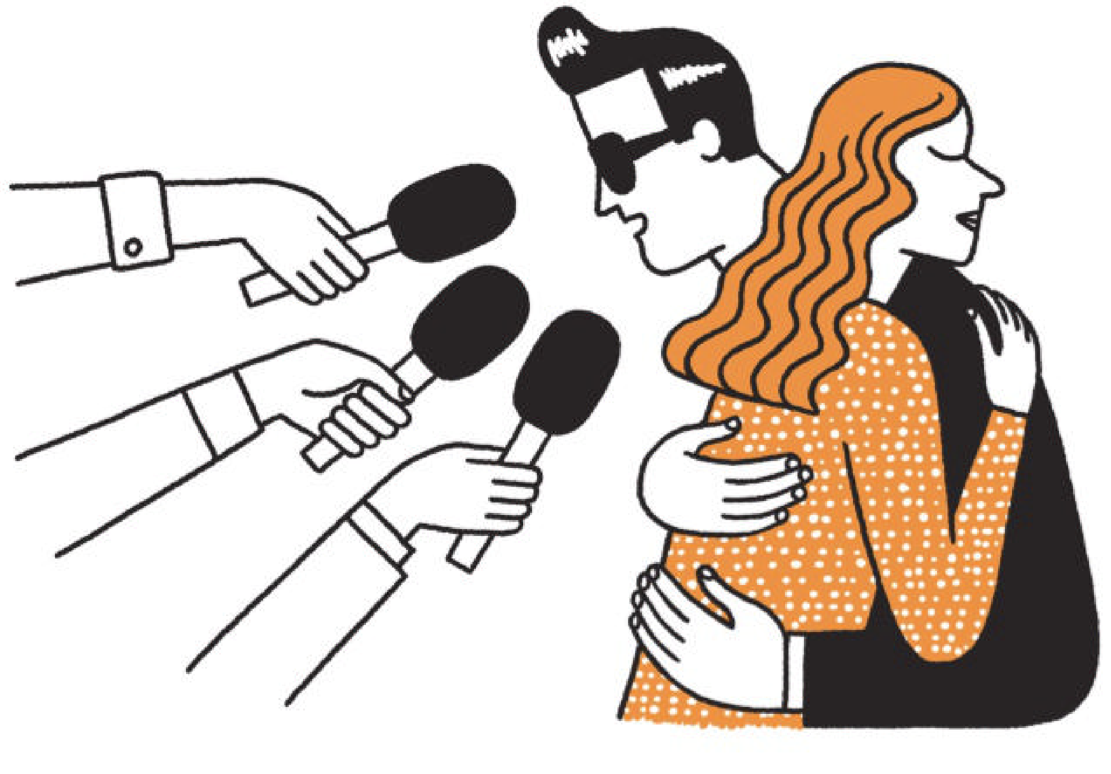
Kenyan authorities are still searching for Folie. Francisca, Mutua's sister, told me, "We just want justice to be served." Rotich is in custody, and recently requested a plea bargain to reduce the charge to manslaughter because, he said, he killed Tirop as a result of an "extreme provocation that left me no other option." The prosecution has declined his request, and his next hearing is expected this month. Tirop's family say that they have recovered some of the properties. "We need him to face judgment," Martin told me.

But the justice system is not often friendly to victims of gender-based violence. I spoke to Andolo Munga, who works on criminal investigations for Iten and the surrounding area. He said that the Tirop and Mutua families had his sympathies, but he contested my use of the term "domestic violence" to describe the cases. He suggested that the motive in Mutua's killing had been a "domestic misunderstanding." He asked me if I was married, and how old I was. "You must be having either a man friend or boyfriend?" Munga said. "Do you want to say it is all a bed of roses?" He continued, "In both cases, nobody had reported that she is being mishandled by the boyfriend or the husband. . . . Why had they not even reported it to Athletics Kenya?" I said that Tirop had talked to someone at Athletics Kenya about her abuse, but that, in general, women were often afraid to report violence, for fear that they would not be taken seriously. Munga told me that women had no reason to fear the police. Many, he said, simply preferred not to press charges, or to use "alternative dispute resolution," a constitutionally enshrined system that allows conflicts to be mediated by local elders rather than by the courts. (A.D.R. is also seen by critics as focussed primarily on reconciling couples, even when partners remain violent.) "We get official reports, you start investigating, then they come and withdraw and say they're going for A.D.R.," Munga said.

Njeri Migwi, the advocacy-group director, told me that, as long as gender-based violence was seen as normal, laws criminalizing it meant nothing. "At health centers, where are the posters?" she asked. "Where is the messaging around gender-based violence? Where do we tell people it's not O.K., and what it is, and how it can look for different people? It needs to be out there at the community level, in schools, in our curriculums." Tirop's Angels has been pushing the government to establish safe houses for victims, and response teams that are separate from police departments. They want prosecutors and police officers to receive more training in dealing with women's claims, and for Athletics Kenya to create more resources for athletes who report abuse. Until then, the burden falls on girls to avoid dangerous situations. The group is urging young female runners to be wary of romantic entanglements with coaches or trainers, and to maintain control of their money once they get married. "You have to pay yourself," Mary Keitany said. "You have to know your rights." Migwi told me that she was hopeful about change coming from grassroots work. "Women talk," she said. "We're taking charge of our own stories."

After the Tirop's Angels event, several women approached Cheptoo for her phone number. "It's been really good to know that people, especially women, finally trust us," she said. She watched the crowd talking on the lawn, drinking tea and eating bread. "When we started Tirop's Angels, it was out of anger, and I needed answers as to why this happened," she said. "I'm still angry, and I don't have any answers." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



MY HUSBAND'S SECRET LIFE

BY STEVE MARTIN

You never really know someone. I had been married for only a year when I learned my husband's secret. I thought I knew him, but we had dated for just a few months when we got engaged. I sometimes wondered exactly what he did for a living, and where his money came from. But whenever I asked he would say, "Oh, don't be silly, sweetheart."

There were warning signs. After our wedding, I kept my job and "Jeff" (not his real name) kept his, although I had no idea what his job was. Some days, I would notice that he didn't go to work at all. When he was on the phone, he would have entire conversations where he only said, "Thank you. Well, thank you. Thank you very much." Several times, I overheard him saying, "Yeah, she's sexy. She'd be good." Other times, he would have to leave for a week.

I would ask, "Where are you going?," and he'd answer, "Oh, you know me, gotta go to the Coast." No, I didn't know him.

On those trips, he'd let me know that he registered in hotels under a different name. Sometimes it was "Mr. Clean." Sometimes it would be "Todd Randolph." In every other respect, however, he was a wonderful husband.

Nervously, I asked if I could accompany him on one of his trips. He surprised me by saying yes. It turned out that "the Coast" was not a coast at all but Southern California. We registered under the names "Mr. and Mrs. Clarence McKenzie" at a beautiful hotel, way beyond our budget. When we got in the elevator, the bellman nodded and said, "Nice to see you, Mr. McKenzie." My husband smiled at him.

That evening, we had dinner in the hotel restaurant. I noticed a man staring at us from his table, as though he knew "Jeff." A woman passed by and smiled familiarly. I said, "Do you know her?" "No," my husband said. On our way out, a man in his forties walked by my husband and said, under his breath, "My father loves you."

In the hotel room that night, we browsed the TV for in-room movies. I suggested we watch "Entrapment," a psychological thriller.

"Oh, please," he said impatiently. He had never been short with me before. Curious, I pressed, saying, "Oh, let's watch it," hoping for a reaction rather than an answer.

"Honey, don't be ridiculous," he said with a dull detachment.

"Why?"

"It was a flop," he said.

"Who cares?"

"Drop it," he said, in a sharp tone.

"You better watch yourself," I said.

"I don't want to watch myself!" he yelled back.

"Jeff!" I shouted. "You're hiding something. What is it?"

He sighed. "I thought you would know by now."

"No, Jeff," I said. "I don't, and it's killing me."

He walked toward me. "Darling," he said, "I am a gigantic movie star."

"A what?" I thought I'd misheard.

"A gigantic international movie star."

I was dumbstruck.

"I tried to tell you," he said. "A hundred times I tried. Remember when I took you to the première of 'Bronx Indigo'? That was me up there."

"You know I don't remember movies that well," I said. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"You can't say to someone, 'I'm a big gigantic movie star,'" he said. "I didn't want you to love me for that."

"Yes, you can!" I said.

He looked at me. "O.K., I'm a big gigantic movie star."

"You can't say that to me," I said.

Suddenly, everything was still, as though a gigantic international movie star had just walked into the room. I finally took a breath and spoke. "It explains so much," I said. "Why I would see you on 'The View.' Why people would say, 'I loved your last film.' Your toupee. And—oh, my God!"

"What, darling?" he asked.

"It explains why there's an Oscar in the living room."

We tried after that, but a relationship that's not founded on telling the truth about whether or not you have an Oscar cannot hold. After we split, I kept remembering my favorite photo of us together: I was facing the camera and he had his arms around me from behind. But, when I found the photo in an old album, I realized that it was not me he had his arms around, but Angelina Jolie. Funny how the mind plays tricks.

A few years later, I remarried. Charles works during the day; I've been to his office. We have a lovely home. He's a simple man, but I love him. And the only mysterious thing about him is the way close friends refer to him as "Mr. President." ◆

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ANNALS OF GASTRONOMY

SPECIAL SAUCE

The Slutty Vegan burger chain puts the party in plant-based eating.

BY CHARLES BETHEA

Pinky Cole says most of her customers are meat-eaters and "we like it that way."

On a recent Saturday evening at the flagship branch of Slutty Vegan, an Atlanta-based burger chain, a hulking former strip-club bouncer was working the door, under a bright sign that read "EAT PLANTS YA SLUT." A dozen people were queued up outside. Another employee, wearing a T-shirt with the restaurant's name in the style of Run DMC's logo, shouted through a microphone as each customer stepped forward, "It's Slutty Saturday!" If the person was a first-time patron, and admitted it, the employee added, "Virgin slut!"

Inside, a d.j. positioned near a rack of merch was playing Drake and Aaliyah at discothèque decibel levels. Three white guys in their late twenties—virgin sluts, all of them—peered up at the menu placard, which included such burgers as the Fussy Hussy (vegan cheese, caramelized onions; $13), the Super Slut (guacamole, jalapeños; $15), and the Ménage à Trois (vegan bacon, vegan shrimp; $19). All were made with plant-based patties from Impossible Foods and doused with a spicy orange "slut sauce."

"We love meat," one of the guys said. "We were debating going to a barbecue, but he"—he gestured at his friend—"really wanted to be called a slut today."

In recent years, proponents of plant-based eating have gone to creative lengths to counter veganism's reputation as preachy and abstemious. Michelin-starred restaurants such as Eleven Madison Park, in New York, have tried to sell customers on the idea that even all-veggie tasting menus can be worth the price of a month's rent. At the other end of the scale, substitute-meat brands have made inroads into the fast-food industry: there are now Impossible Whoppers at Burger King and Beyond Meat sausage links in supermarket freezer aisles. But perhaps no establishment has done as much as Slutty Vegan to challenge the perception that a vegan diet is by and for pleasureless people.

The company's founder and C.E.O., Pinky Cole, is thirty-five years old, with waist-length pink ombré dreadlocks. She wears a necklace with the word "vegan" and a marijuana leaf encrusted in diamonds. Her entrepreneurial streak dates back to her youth in Baltimore, when she and a high-school friend would buy McChickens for a dollar and sell them to their classmates for two. Cole estimates that three-quarters of Slutty Vegan's customers are meat-eaters. "We like it that way," she told me recently. "It's not a vegan concept where we're this glorified group that's better than everybody else." Though plant-based, a Slutty Vegan burger is not exactly health food. Cole declined to share nutritional information with me, but said, "I won't sit here and tell you to eat Slutty Vegan every single day, all day. But I do want you to understand that veganism can be healthier, even if it starts with burgers and fries."

Slutty Vegan's inclusive party atmosphere proved highly effective from the outset. After the flagship launched, near my home, in downtown Atlanta, in 2020, I noticed customers arriving hours before the doors opened to wait in line in lawn chairs. The restaurant is situated in a gentrifying section of the city's Old Fourth Ward, a historically Black area, just a block from the childhood home of Martin Luther King, Jr. There had been other recent additions to the dining scene: Staplehouse, which was just up the road, had been named *Bon Appétit's* Best New Restaurant in America in 2016. But Slutty Vegan became the area's most hyped destination, amplified by local celebrities such as Usher and Shaquille O'Neal—an

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROSS LANDENBERGER

investor in Beyond Meat—who posted videos on social media documenting their experience getting "sluttified." As it happened, I was trying to quit eating factory-farmed meat. When I first went to Slutty Vegan, and finally made it to the front of the line, I discovered that a "shrimp" dish called the Side Heaux came close to supplying the cheap dopamine hit of my old lunchtime crutch, a fried-chicken sandwich from Chick-fil-A. Like most people, though, I went back in equal parts for the vegan food and for the vibes.

According to one recent study, more than a quarter of Americans would choose meat substitutes if they were as cheap and as tasty as the real thing. In reality, though, even the leading products remain more expensive than conventional meat—which is kept cheap by government subsidies—and are not quite as delicious. Since a surge in sales several years ago, the plant-based-proteins business has stagnated. Both Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat are laying off employees. Last August, McDonald's pulled its McPlant sandwich from the menu after a trial run. Slutty Vegan, meanwhile, has continued to expand, despite the fact that its burgers cost several times more than a traditional fast-food sandwich. There are now seven locations in Georgia, including a new one in Truist Park, where the Atlanta Braves play, plus one in Birmingham, Alabama, and three in New York City—two brick and mortar and one so-called cloud kitchen, offering delivery only. In early 2022, the New Voices Fund, co-founded by the entrepreneur Richelieu Dennis, and Enlightened Hospitality Investments, run by the restaurateur Danny Meyer, bought a combined twenty-five-per-cent ownership stake, bringing Slutty Vegan's valuation to a hundred million dollars. Meyer, who founded the Shake Shack burger chain, told me, "It's this very unusual juxtaposition of veganism, which is often connected to what I'm *not allowed* to eat, with sluttiness, which is all the things that I'm *gonna do* even though I'm not allowed to."

Cole is using the investment to open a number of new Slutty Vegan locations before the end of the year, including the first drive-through, in Columbus, Georgia. Last September, an outpost was launched in Brooklyn's Fort Greene neighborhood with a block party that drew crowds beginning at 8 A.M., even if, according to the New York *Post*, not all parents were thrilled with the restaurant's choice of name. ("It's very offensive. Mommy doesn't like it, and you should never say it," one woman explained to her seven-year-old son.)

On Slutty Saturday at the Atlanta flagship, the three guys took their burgers over to a counter and carefully unwrapped them. One munched approvingly on a crinkle-cut fry coated in proprietary "slut dust," then took a bite of his Fussy Hussy.

"Better than McDonald's," he said.

"Better than *American* McDonald's," the second guy countered, adding that European McDonald's and Slutty Vegan might be neck and neck.

The third guy was still contemplating his Ménage à Trois. He'd never eaten a vegan burger of any kind. "You know how in video games you start with a generic character with no experience and no upgrades?" he said. "That's what this is for me."

"I got my entrepreneurial hustle from my dad, the most brilliant man I've ever known," Cole told me one Thursday in February, as we sat eating hot "chicken" sandwiches and drinking mojitos at Bar Vegan, a small-plates Slutty Vegan spinoff in Atlanta's Ponce City Market, a converted Sears building that's now home to dozens of high-end venders. The day Cole was born, her father, Stanley, a Jamaican immigrant, was sentenced to thirty years in prison for his role as the leader of what prosecutors described as a "large-scale cocaine distribution ring," whose proceeds he laundered through fronts including a Baltimore night club called Exodus. "He did what he had to do to provide for his family," Cole said. After his imprisonment, she and her four siblings were raised by her mother, Ichelle, also from Jamaica, who worked in a bank and as a McDonald's cashier to support the family on her own. She also sang in Strykers Posse, an all-female reggae cover band, and wore dreadlocks that hung to the ground. "People always wanted her picture—I wanted to be like *that* when I grew up," Cole said.

Before she was old enough to drive, Cole was running logistics for a Baltimore party-promoting crew. To secure leases on venues, she'd dress in pants suits and act the part of an older woman. Charles Smith, who helped start the crew and now makes music under the name DJ Blaqstarr, told me, of the routine, "It was like some Tyler Perry stuff." They handed out flyers at schools and malls and were soon drawing a thousand kids to parties in downtown warehouses at ten bucks a head. Smith recalled that the fire marshal showed up repeatedly, and that at one party the organizers were robbed at gunpoint, but that Cole had a dogged show-must-go-on attitude. In her junior year, she got kicked out of school after a dispute with another girl over the title of prom queen—"I was the aggressor," she told me—but persuaded the superintendent to let her transfer to the city's best all-girls public school. From there, she matriculated at a historically black university, Clark Atlanta ("basically because I saw Ludacris there on MTV," she said), where she joined an élite sorority and became the campus beauty-pageant queen. Crystal Kelly, a classmate and a close friend, told me, "I'd never known someone with so much belief in herself."

Cole graduated in 2009, with a degree in communications, and, after a false start with Teach for America, moved to Los Angeles to try to make it as an actress. "I had two hundred and fifty dollars, a suitcase, and a Bible," Cole said. ("I don't read the Bible," she added. "It was just for, like, symbolic protection.") She took acting classes and spent a few months as an extra on "Glee," but the gig paid poorly, and a former sorority sister encouraged her to take a job in production. Cole spent the next few years working on tabloidy talk shows, including Maury Povitch's, which, she said, "showed me that Black people ain't the only people that got problems." By the age of twenty-four, she was making six figures. But the work didn't satisfy her enterprising side. In 2014, a Jamaican friend in Harlem, who ran a restaurant, mentioned that a storefront around the corner was for rent. Cole had no background in food service, but she had money saved and her boyfriend at the time was handy enough to help build the space out. She told me, "It just made sense."

When Cole was growing up, Ichelle

followed a vegetarian Ital diet, according to Rastafarian tradition: stews of red beans and okra in coconut milk; brown rice with steamed rhubarb, collards, or callaloo. But Ichelle's mother, who lived with them, made dishes like oxtail, pressure-cooked until the meat was sticky and tender. Cole's restaurant, Pinky's Jamaican and American, served that dish and other Caribbean staples—beef patties, ackees, steaming crab legs. Cole hadn't yet arrived at the flamboyant style that would define Slutty Vegan, but she painted the restaurant's exterior the color of bubble gum, and the Pinky's Web site boasted, "The best damn jerk in Harlem!" She told me, "I didn't have a publicist, and I didn't get reviewed, but I still had lines." A year later, she opened a juice bar, also called Pinky's.

Since college, Cole had experimented with eliminating meat from her diet, and now she went fully plant-based. She looked at veganism as a personal test. "I'm the one who wants to get to my highest level of achievement," she told me, adding that even now she sometimes takes a "raw vegan challenge," a trend of temporarily forgoing cooked food, which she tapped into on YouTube. "I'm a master faster," she said. "I'm always elevating."

In the summer of 2016, a grease fire destroyed the Pinky's restaurant. Cole had no fire insurance, and she'd put most of her savings into the business. Her car was repossessed, and she was evicted from her apartment. She started a GoFundMe campaign to help pay for a reopening, but soon gave up the idea. Around the same time, her boyfriend was arrested for killing someone in a fight. (He was convicted of manslaughter and remains incarcerated.) "It was the low point of my life," Cole told me.

She returned to L.A. and to TV work, as a supervising producer on "Iyanla: Fix My Life," a talk show on the Oprah Winfrey Network hosted by the inspirational speaker Iyanla Vanzant. "It was almost like going to therapy, and I didn't have to pay for it," Cole said. She started running five miles a day and reading self-help books with titles such as "Think and Grow Rich." Kelly, her college friend, told me that Cole often bounced around new business ideas, not all of them sterling. ("I recall a weave-cleaning concept," she said, laughing.) But Cole's embrace of veganism provided new fodder. Her older brother Jaware, an early employee of Slutty Vegan, recalls her bemoaning the lack of vegan food options late at night, "after leaving the club." In 2018, Cole went back to Atlanta to take a short-term role on a TV show. One evening, lying in bed in a rental apartment downtown, she became lost in thought. "Honestly, I'd hit the blunt," she told me. "And I'm not even a smoker! But I was high. It was a good high." She called Kelly to float the name for a new restaurant concept. They considered a few—including Vixen Vegan—but Kelly approved of Cole's first choice. "I was, like, Slutty Vegan, hands down—that's the one," Kelly recalled. "Sex sells."

One recent weekday afternoon, Cole was at the Whittley Agency, a Black-owned business-management and consulting firm in Atlanta, sitting at a long conference table beneath a "Black Panther" movie poster. She wore a skin-tight black dress and Chanel sneakers and had her hair (maintained, she said, with the help of a "hair-style architect") in a cascading topknot. She held up her phone to inspect Slutty Vegan's Instagram account, which has the advantage of being the app's first result for "slutty." The account has five hundred and eighty-four thousand followers. "We'll have a million by the end of the year," she told me.

A young Black man walked into the room, wearing tortoiseshell sunglasses and an Atlanta Hawks ball cap. He was a representative from Lululemon, the athleisure brand. Cole had called the meeting to discuss a potential partnership. After some introductions, she launched into a pitch.

"Slutty Vegan is not just a restaurant," she said, and mentioned a recent team-up with the footwear designer Steve Madden to create a limited-edition vegan-leather sneaker. "Sold out in forty-eight hours," she said, leaning toward the rep. "We did a partnership with Shake Shack: sold out in an hour. People look at us as a *life-style* brand."

Dora Whittley, the founder of the consulting agency, sat beside Cole, wearing dangly earrings and a black turtleneck with puffed shoulders. The group discussed the idea of Slutty Vegan and Lululemon working together on body-positivity campaigns, on philanthropic initiatives, and on a documentary series about bootstrap entrepreneurs which Cole, on the spot, dubbed "Lulu Lemonade."

"We call her 'Pinky Is the Brain,'" Whittley said. "Because literally anything you give to her, her mind goes to creative ideation. It's almost automated."

There was a TV at one end of the room, and Whittley pressed Play on a sizzle reel for a new project that Cole was developing, tentatively called "American Sesh," in which celebrities, entrepreneurs, and "creatives" are given "thirty seconds to come up with a company that can scale to a billion-dollar business." Cole mentioned that she'd arranged a meeting about it with Mark Burnett, the producer of "Survivor" and "The Apprentice." ("Pinky clearly has her finger firmly on the pulse of what's next in business," Burnett told me.)

"Do y'all do, like, what Stephen Curry is to Under Armour?" she asked the rep.

"We call those global ambassadors," he said.

"Let's include me on that potential list, then," Cole said.

"One hundred per cent," the rep said. "You'd fit as a city ambassador, and then elevate into a global ambassador eventually."

"I'm already global—the world just don't see me yet," Cole said, adding, "I am going to be bigger than Oprah." Both Whittley and the rep nodded solemnly.

When the meeting ended, Cole and Whittley dialled in two managers and two publicists for an "all things Pinky Cole" briefing. They discussed an *Essence* cover shoot, a branded CBD "slutty gummy," and ways to drum up more good press for Bar Vegan. (The month before, a former Bar Vegan employee had filed a wage-theft lawsuit against Cole and her business partners; Cole responded that she was not involved in the restaurant's day-to-day operations, adding, "I was not familiar with this ordeal.") Cole had pitched a collaboration with Ben & Jerry's on a Slutty Vegan-themed flavor called One Night Stand—like the company's burger of the same name, it would feature faux bacon—and had booked an appearance on "Good Morning America" to discuss her cookbook, "Eat Plants, B*tch," which includes sections such as "Da Butter, Da Dips, Da Jams, and Da Jellies." The grand opening of a Slutty Vegan outpost in Harlem was also approaching, and Cole wanted it to be a surprise to the public. "Similar to the Beyoncé album she suddenly dropped: the whole Internet in a *frenzy*," she said, adding, "Hopefully, I can get Al Sharpton to stand beside me. Jesse Jackson DM'd me the other day." (In the end, the opening, in March, was a more subdued affair—the weather was lousy, Sharpton was nowhere to be found—but Cole described returning to Harlem, just down the street from the former Pinky's spot, as a "full-circle moment.")

A few minutes later, Cole's phone pinged, and she tapped at it with long gold nails. It was a message from an employee saying that the N.B.A. player Chris Paul—a noted vegan and a Slutty Vegan investor—was in town. Just like that, Cole was back to running orders. "He wants some food tonight," she said.

"Well, if you never want to see me again then maybe you'd like to see more of me now."

Cole started selling Slutty Vegan burgers out of a commercial-kitchen space in an Atlanta suburb in August of 2018. The kitchen's procurement manager suggested that she try using plant-based patties from Impossible, which weren't yet widely available in stores. A chef she found on Instagram flunked a tryout, so Cole devised the dishes herself. "Food needs personality," she told me. When I asked her for insights about her recipe development, she instead shared the thinking behind the dishes' names: One Night Stand, because "everyone wants a taboo experience"; Sloppy Toppy, because "we've all given some sloppy toppy." Jaware mixed Cole's first batches of slut sauce and slut dust—the secret ingredient, he said, was "love"—and they began offering delivery through apps such as Uber Eats. Cierra Sanders, a friend of Cole's since high school, recalled, "After the first day, she called me and said she literally sold a single burger."

Word soon spread after a friend with a vegan-ice-cream shop plugged Slutty Vegan to her twenty-five thousand Instagram followers. A month into the experiment, Cole bought an old food truck, which she'd drive from spot to spot in the city, teasing her whereabouts online. She hired Ludacris's manager, Chaka Zulu, who'd also attended Clark Atlanta, and with his counsel got various rappers to endorse her food. In January, 2019, Cole posted a video on Slutty Vegan's Instagram showing Snoop Dogg standing in front of the truck, saying, "You got a lot to be slutty fo'." (Cole told me, "He only got the fries.") From there, demand exploded. "I felt like a drug dealer," Cole said. "We had, like, trash bags of money, because we only took cash." Jaware, who was in charge of collecting the proceeds, told me that he carried two pistols for protection. "I had more than twenty thousand almost every night, in my pocket, just bulging out," he said.

On Super Bowl Sunday this past February, which was also Jaware's thirty-ninth birthday, I attended a party at Cole's home in a gated "country-club community" outside of the city, where she lives with her fiancé, Derrick Hayes, and their two young children. The house is one of more than twenty properties that Cole owns, including most of her restaurant locations. ("I've got a real-estate addiction," she told me. "It's like tattoos.") Hayes, a thirty-five-year-old Philadelphia native with blond-tipped hair, had flown a group of friends and family members in from Philly to watch the Eagles play the Kansas City Chiefs.

He was standing near a new eighty-five-inch television in the living room, wearing a throwback Randall Cunningham Eagles jersey. Hayes is the proprietor of Big Dave's Cheesesteaks, another successful Atlanta business, specializing in "world-renowned" Philadelphia-style beef sandwiches. A few years ago, Cole's friends suggested that she meet him. "They was, like, 'This guy selling cheesesteaks. He's got lines down the block. Y'all would be a power couple.' I'm, like, 'I'm not dating nobody that's not vegan.' I was adamant. I wasn't even gonna kiss him." During the racial-justice protests in the summer of 2020, the windows of one of Big Dave's two locations were shattered, and Cole sent Hayes a DM asking if he needed help. He didn't, but the two met for lunch, at a vegan restaurant called Café Sunflower. It was Hayes's first vegan dining experience, though he doesn't recall eating much. "The conversation was so strong," he said. "Next thing you know, we're together every day."

"It wasn't a date, just two local leaders in the food world," Cole said. "But he was cute." (For some vegans, her choice to get together with a meatmonger remains a sticking point. One man I met at the restaurant, who said he repudiates meat for ethical reasons, complained, "She's not a real vegan." He still shelled out sixty-nine dollars for two Ménages à Trois and two Chik'n Heads, which feature MorningStar Farms' Incogmeato coated in Buffalo sauce.)

At the Super Bowl party, an impressive spread of food—both meat and veggie—was laid out on a table, though none of it was from Cole's or Hayes's restaurants. They'd hired up-and-coming businesses to cater, including Dougie's Hoagies, owned by a cousin, Douglas Hayes. "It hasn't taken off yet, but I'm coming," he told me. Hayes's ninety-year-old grandmother, Essie, who lives with the couple, was sitting at the kitchen counter eating barbecued chicken. Ichelle, who also lives with them, was upstairs with the children. Cole used the commercial breaks to raffle off cash and copies of "Eat Plants, B*tch," and to preside over Patrón drinking games.

After halftime, the crowd sang "Happy Birthday" to Jaware. Mellow and broad-shouldered, he was holding a green Solo cup in one hand and an unlit joint in the other. "I'm so happy as a big brother to see my sister made it," he told me. "The whole family's riding high." Pinky's oldest brother, Rashan, was with the Slutty Vegan truck for a Super Bowl pop-up in Kansas City, the company's first foray into the Midwest.

"Plenty of potential customers out there, too," Cole said.

The Eagles lost by three points, blowing a fourth-quarter lead, but the mood remained buoyant. "Defeat does not mean de end," Cole said, handing out shots of tequila. A few minutes later, she was at the center of a dance party, with Meek Mill's "Dreams and Nightmares" blasting from the speakers.

Cole told me that when she first started Slutty Vegan her customer base was largely Black. Her restaurants showed people that "you don't have to make a certain amount of money or live in a certain area to be vegan," she said. In that sense, Slutty Vegan belongs to a movement of Black veganism that has seen a renaissance in recent years, propelled by social-justice issues such as health equity and food access. But Slutty Vegan has in some ways outgrown that affinity. "This ain't a Black thing," Cole said. "There's people who are Black, white, yellow, blue, Asian, green. We're trying to reach them all."

Danny Meyer, the Shake Shack founder, told me that he first visited Slutty Vegan during a trip to Atlanta for a friend's birthday party in 2021, a few months after Shake Shack's Harlem location ran a limited-time Slutty-Shack burger collab (slut dust, kale, vegan ranch dressing). "Probably the first time a bus of twenty Northern white people descended upon Slutty Vegan," Meyer, who is white, told me, adding, "I could eat slut dust on the back of my hand." Invoking the restaurant's "crossover" appeal, he conjured a vision of two hundred additional Slutty Vegans across the country, "in any city that has an urban vibe to it." He added, "It doesn't have to be a hip-hop vibe, but it helps."

The restaurant industry is notoriously unfriendly to Black talent. In 2019, Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group came under fire for its handling of alleged racial discrimination at its fine-dining jewel, Gramercy Tavern. (Neither Meyer nor Union Square commented publicly about the complaints.) Though Meyer had created a "diversity council" two years prior, only three per cent of the company's salaried employees at the time were Black. His firm's investment of millions in Cole's business suggests a realization that, in Slutty Vegan's case, Black culture is selling vegan food better than vegan food can sell itself.

Leah Garcés, the Atlanta-based president of Mercy for Animals, an international nonprofit working to eliminate factory farming, told me that she's learned a lot from Cole about how to influence people's dietary choices. "As an advocate, I wanna just tell people, It's cruel, don't eat animals," Garcés said. "But, even if you feel that, it's a message that causes walls to go up." Cole's "genius," she added, is that she made vegan dining inspire FOMO. "She takes famous Black actors and rappers and influencers and they go on I.G. and try this burger that's called, like, the Ménage à Trois, and they can't believe it's not meat," she said. "I know vegans all over the world, and they were, like, 'Have you gone?' I'm, like, 'I don't have four hours to wait in line!'" Cole's aims aren't purely ideological—in our conversations, she never once brought up animal welfare—and by her own admission she is first and foremost a saleswoman. Slutty Vegan, as she puts it, is a "marketing business that just so happens to have a restaurant that sells burgers and fries." But it would be counterproductive for ethical vegans to dismiss her on those grounds. "Taking down factory-farming is hard enough," Garcés told me. "I don't think anyone dares judge Pinky Cole for being a capitalist or anything else."

As a Black-owned food chain, though, Slutty Vegan is answerable to more than one set of political concerns. Mike Jordan, a graduate of Morehouse College and a longtime Atlanta food writer, also called Cole a marketing genius. But he said he worries about her leveraging of Black celebrity and culture to sell Slutty Vegan burgers, given that they're not all that healthy—or, in his opinion, that good. "Do people like the burger? When you ask them in a safe space, people really don't," he said. "It's all a vibe, and it leads to, If we can get, like, Cardi B and Offset, then we're good, because hip-hop sells food products." He mentioned the history of junk food being pushed on Black communities through ad campaigns spotlighting "Black aspiration and success." Cole is upsetting certain food stereotypes but, in Jordan's mind, reinforcing others. "To me, it's a scary idea that not great dietary offerings are marketed back to Black people," he said.

By contrast, Jay Bailey, the head of an Atlanta-based nonprofit incubator for Black entrepreneurs, emphasized Cole's role at the forefront of a new generation of business leaders. He often points out that, despite lip service to D.E.I.—diversity, equity, and inclusion—black entrepreneurs receive less than two per cent of venture-capital investment nationwide. "When I think of McDonald's, their avatar is Ronald McDonald. When I think about Wendy's, I think about the redhead with pigtails," Bailey said. "Pinky has an opportunity to truly embody the brand and take it maybe much further than any of them with the charismatic leadership she brings." Through his organization, Russell Innovation Center for Entrepreneurs, Bailey has helped nurture hundreds of Atlanta businesses, including Shay Latte ("Atlanta's smoothest" coffee), Runningnerds ("a contemporary running community"), and PuffCuff, purveyors of a banana hair clip that "isn't shaped like a banana." To his regret, he has no personal stake in Cole's business. "I missed the boat," he told me, with a rueful chuckle. "I'd sell the farm for a piece of Slutty Vegan."

The day after their Super Bowl party, Cole and Hayes arrived at the Slutty Vegan flagship for the company's first time hosting a wedding. The idea was another Cole promotional scheme: the company would foot the bill, and she'd officiate herself; the proceedings would be documented on Slutty Vegan's social media under the hashtag #LoveAtFirstBite. Cole put out a call and heard from hundreds of candidates hoping to "sluttify" their big day. The winners, James Boozer and Joyce Glaize, an omnivorous couple in their sixties, had planned to marry at the courthouse before Glaize saw the contest on Instagram. "I said, O.K., let's just go with it," Boozer said. "I didn't know she wanted to be the Slutty bride."

Cole's outfit was priest chic: black dress with white trim and creamy "marriage nails" decorated with crosses. A half hour before the ceremony, she hadn't yet written her remarks. I asked if she was nervous. "The only person who could make me nervous is Oprah," she said.

The restaurant had been transformed into an intimate wedding venue, with twenty seats facing a makeshift altar of fake red roses in the shape of a giant heart. ("We had to slim down our guest list from sixty-five," Glaize told me.) Hayes looked tired. "We was up till three," he said. He was craving hangover food, but he'd promised Cole that he'd start a weeklong raw vegan challenge that day. "Tell her these are for you," he told me, placing some fries on a cloth-draped table between us.

Boozer and Glaize were dressed for a black-tie affair—tuxedo and rose corsage, silk bridal gown and floor-length veil. They took their places at the altar in front of a dark cloth backdrop, through which a glaring restaurant display screen was faintly visible. Cole stood before them, beaming. She and Hayes will be getting married, too, in a few months. Her father, Stanley, was released from prison a decade ago and deported to Jamaica, so after a ceremony Stateside they will hold the reception there.

"These two have a love résumé," Cole told the assembled guests, relaying how Boozer and Glaize, sweethearts in their youth, had reconnected on LinkedIn after first marriages and four decades spent apart. "At the end of the day, you show up prepared for the job, because you've done the work." The couple's vows had been written with the help of Slutty Vegan employees. "Thank you for being my Sloppy Toppy," Boozer said, reading from a card. "What could have started as a One Night Stand became the love story of my life. You can sometimes be a Fussy Hussy, but you'll always be my Dancehall Queen." Like many customers exposed to Cole's marketing ploys, the bride and groom seemed both a bit bewildered and genuinely charmed.

A ring bearer approached with the wedding bands, which he held inside a Slutty Vegan Hawaiian roll. A flower girl stood by with a bag of fries tucked under her arm, ready to scatter. Cole teared up as the newlyweds shared their first kiss. Her personal assistant hurried over with a napkin. Dabbing at her eyes, Cole looked out over the crowd. "Who is cutting onions back there?" she said. ♦

The journalist Miroslava Breach Velducea was born in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, in a mountainous region that the U.S. government has called the Golden Triangle of drug trafficking and that Mexico's President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, would prefer to be known as the Triangle of Good, Hardworking People. In the late nineteen-sixties, when Breach was a child, she was drawn to the ancient pine forests of the Sierra Tarahumara, near her home town of Chínipas de Almada. By the time she was an adult, however, many of those magical forests had been razed. Laborers would eventually turn some of the clearings into poppy fields and marijuana plantations. Later, as more trees fell, fentanyl and methamphetamine labs rose up, the better to satisfy American demand.

Much of the narcotics industry in the Sierra Tarahumara is controlled by the Salazars, a cartel that took form in Chínipas. The Salazars pay for baptisms and funerals; they kill activists and journalists when their interests are threatened; and they monitor communications throughout their territory, which extends into the neighboring state of Sonora. Many reporters are afraid to venture in. But Breach drove the treacherous alpine roads of the Sierra in broad daylight, in a cherry-red S.U.V.

For nearly two decades, she documented cartel crimes and political corruption that most residents would discuss only in whispers, and published what she'd discovered in *La Jornada*, a national newspaper, and *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*, a regional paper. Chasing leads for stories, she took hairpin curves at such speed that some colleagues refused to ride with her. "If I die," she liked to say, one eyebrow rising, "it will be complete and in one blow."

Breach wrote as she spoke—clearly, provocatively, and with an ethical severity that other reporters could find grating. She didn't just return the holiday gift baskets that elected officials sent to journalists, her friend and colleague Olga Aragón told me; she attached a reproachful note saying that politicians should be giving her interviews, not gifts. "She didn't write anything unless she had first-hand testimony and documents," Carlos Omar Barranco, another reporter and friend, said, and she had little time for

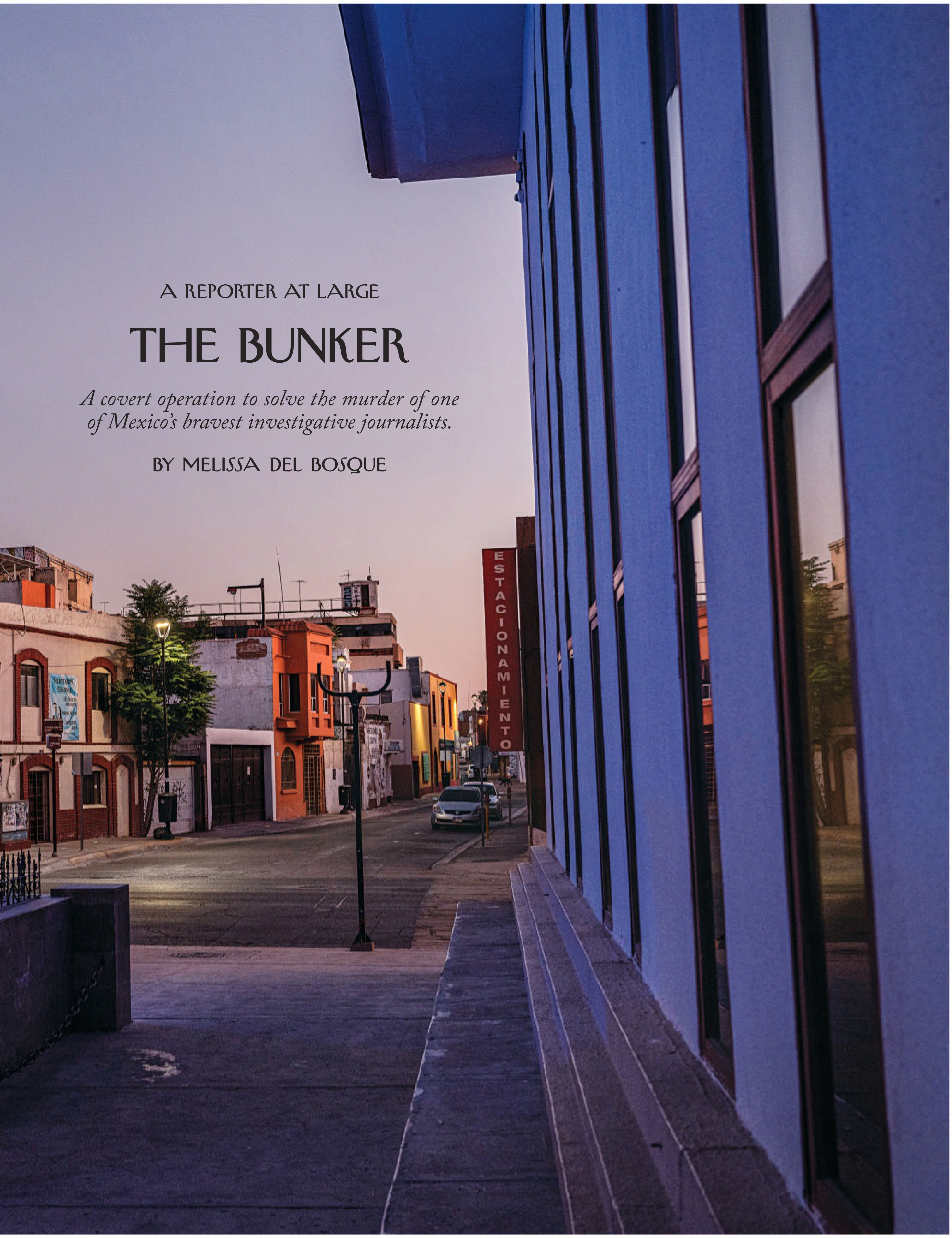
For nearly two decades, Miroslava Breach documented cartel crimes and political

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE BUNKER

A covert operation to solve the murder of one of Mexico's bravest investigative journalists.

BY MELISSA DEL BOSQUE



corruption in her home state of Chihuahua. A monument to justice stands near her former office, in the state capital.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NATALIE KEYSSAR

empathetic reporting about victims if it meant leaving culprits off the hook. In March, 2017, she attended a meeting at the Chihuahua state capitol about rich citizens illegally drilling water that was desperately needed by the public at large. As human-rights leaders held forth onstage about the water crisis, Breach, in the audience, grew agitated that they weren't pushing state officials to stop those who were stealing the water. "No, no, no," she said sharply, waving a leaflet in her hand and launching a fusillade of objections. "What," she demanded, "is your *concrete* proposal?"

To some colleagues, the exchange was classic Miroslava—up on her high horse, telling even the do-gooders that they had to do better. But Guadalupe Salcido, the editor-in-chief of *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*, where Breach worked as an editor and political columnist, had noticed that her boldest colleague seemed tense, and not just about illegal water wells. One day, Salcido called her to discuss a famine unfolding in the Sierra's Indigenous communities. Drought had led to crop failure, and children were starving: in the past, as soon as Breach had grasped the particulars, she would start shoving reporting notebooks and a change of clothes into a tote bag, preparing to race toward the story. This time, Salcido told me, Breach said she needed to "think about it."

Breach, who was fifty-four, had been hard at work on a series of articles about the growing network of drug routes in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range, which included Chínipas and the Sierra Tarahumara. These articles had been reported in collaboration with Patricia Mayorga, who worked for *Proceso*, a weekly magazine, and *El Diario de Juárez*, a daily paper. The pieces had been causing a sensation. The reporters had amassed evidence that the Salazars and other narcos had set up political candidates as fronts for their own interests, and that the two biggest parties in the state—the center-right Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the conservative National Action Party (PAN)—had gone along with the scheme.

Typically, after a stretch of intense reporting, Breach would crank up the music of the Cuban folk singer Silvio Rodríguez, drink some tequila, and spend a weekend hiking in the mountains with her daughter and son. Then she'd head back to her office. But as her investigative series continued, friends had noticed, she seemed discouraged.

Mayorga knew something others did not: that, for months, Breach had been receiving threats—messages ominous enough that she had recently reviewed the life-insurance provisions she'd made to secure her children's futures and asked a company in El Paso what it would cost to bulletproof her S.U.V. The estimate for the armor plating came to thousands of dollars; Breach was a single mother who lived on a journalist's wages. Despite working multiple jobs, Aragón told me, she couldn't swing it. Other means of protecting herself would have to do. Instead of making a living exposing the crimes of dangerous people, she told friends, she could run a restaurant, or maybe open a shop that specialized in Chihuahuan delicacies. She was interested in marine biology and relished whale-watching on the Baja California peninsula. Why couldn't she start a magazine devoted to nature tourism? Her friends didn't pay much mind to such talk; reporting, Breach always said, was her "essence." Salcido told her teasingly, "You will die without journalism."

The day that Breach insisted human-rights leaders do more to stop the wealthy from stealing public water, a gray Chevy Malibu with a ducktail spoiler was passing down the quiet residential street where she and her children lived, circling back, and passing again. Just before 7 A.M. the following morning, March 23rd, Breach was in the driveway in her red S.U.V. when the gray Malibu turned down the street one more time. She was waiting to take her fourteen-year-old son to school, and, as he came outside and shut the front door, a man in a bright-blue baseball cap exited the Malibu, approached the S.U.V., and shot Breach eight times at close range through the windows. The assailant jumped into a white Malibu that had been waiting nearby, and both cars sped away. Breach's S.U.V. jolted into reverse, smashing into a car across the street. Her twenty-five-year-old daughter, who had sometimes accompanied her mother on reporting trips, ran outside when she heard her little brother scream.

Breach was dead, and within minutes the news of her killing had spread through the journalism community in Mexico, and beyond. Javier Valdez Cárdenas, a prize-winning investigative journalist and a former colleague of Breach's, who reported on drug trafficking in Sinaloa, wrote on Twitter, "Let them kill us all, if it is the death sentence for reporting this hell." Within weeks, he, too, would be shot and killed in the street.

Since 2000, as drug conflicts have intensified in many parts of the country, more than a hundred members of the Mexican media have been murdered or have disappeared. There have been precious few arrests for these crimes, which are thought to have been carried out by members of the cartels and their accomplices. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, no peacetime government in the world provides less redress for such killings than Mexico. In the past decade, by C.P.J.'s count, there have been more unsolved journalist murders in Mexico than in Syria, South Sudan, and Myanmar combined. But, in the case of Miroslava Breach's murder, there were several reasons to believe that an entrenched culture of impunity might finally be challenged.

The murder scene had been captured on at least five security cameras, from multiple angles. The circumstances—a mother about to start the school run killed in front of her children—had horrified the public. And the victim had had an influential friend. Despite her insistence that journalists remain aloof from politicians, she had been close to the most powerful elected official in the state: the reform-minded new governor of Chihuahua, Javier Corral Jurado, who had been a journalist himself. When he was elected, Breach had been elated. "Together, they would battle corruption," Aragón recalled. Now, Corral signalled, he'd be personally involved in the effort to track down Breach's killers.

On the morning of the murder, he went directly to the crime scene. He also alerted Patricia Mayorga, who had been receiving threats herself, that police protection was on its way; an armored police vehicle promptly arrived at her home. A few hours later, at a press conference, he stated plainly what other politicians, in similar situations, did not dare say: that Breach had almost certainly been killed as retribution for something she wrote.

To some of the grieving journalists in attendance, Corral, a member of the PAN, felt almost like family. After winning the governorship in 2016 on an anti-corruption platform, he'd brought respected journalists and human-rights activists into an administration he was calling New Dawn. He was openly disgusted with narcos and their political bribes, and now he was saying that the state wouldn't stop until justice for Breach had been secured. In subsequent months, in interviews and press conferences, he'd go further. Governor Corral intended to make the investigation a model of how to solve the murder of a journalist in Mexico.

Miroslava Breach's father, a struggling shopkeeper, died when she was eight. Shortly afterward, her widowed mother lost land that the family owned. "They almost immediately fell into poverty," Aragón told me. For the rest of her life, Miroslava, the third of six siblings, gravitated toward topics of injustice and dispossession.

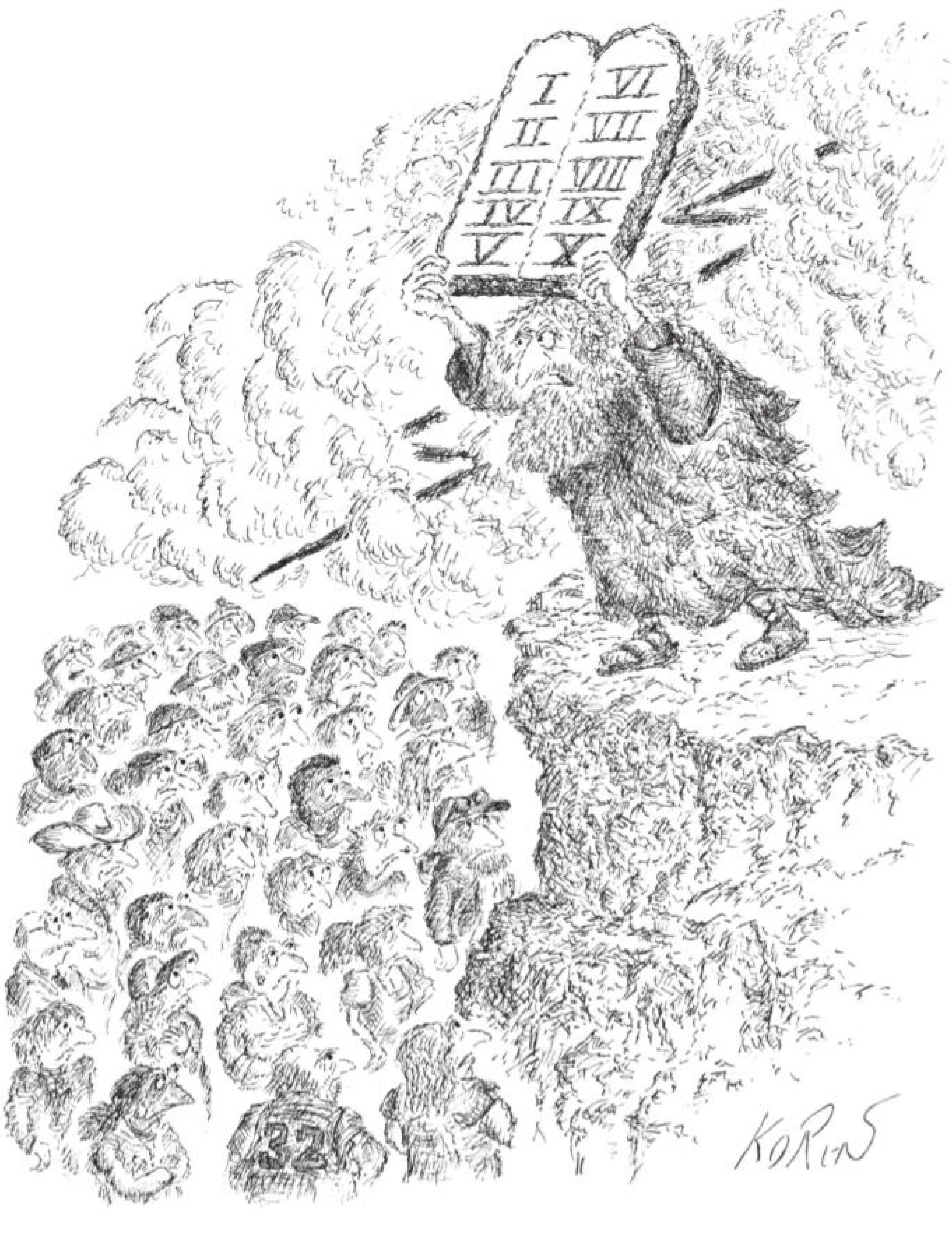
After her mother opened another shop in a new town, young Miroslava often worked its counter, undermining family profit margins by giving away food to needy neighbors. Later, animated more by Karl Marx than by anything on offer in class or at Catholic Mass, she would come to understand how little occasional acts of charity meant in a context of intractable power.

The Salazar family, before becoming a mafia, had been ranchers. Not long after diversifying into narcotics, however, the family began driving longtime inhabitants, including Indigenous peoples, out of the forests in order to use their land. By the early two-thousands, the process could be methodical and brutal. Families who were not of use as labor in the poppy and marijuana fields or narcotics labs were sometimes evicted from their communities at gunpoint.

Adán Salazar Zamorano, a septuagenarian with a heavy brow and a handlebar mustache, is the patriarch of the family. In the nineties, under Don Adán, as he is known, the Salazars began to collaborate with the Sinaloa cartel, the famously violent organization once led by Joaquín (El Chapo) Guzmán Loera. In 2011, Don Adán, wanted by the U.S. government for drug trafficking, was detained and imprisoned in Mexico. Around 2016, his younger brother, Crispín, took control of day-to-day operations.

In the course of Salazar-Sinaloa maneuvers, and the destruction of communities that these entailed, many people were murdered or disappeared: activists, Jesuit priests, journalists, census takers, tourists. Don Adán is suspected of presiding over the 2005 disappearance of a journalist, Alfredo Jiménez Mota; Mexican authorities said that one of Don Adán's sons, Jesús Alfredo, was behind the vanishing of an activist and a lawyer. (*The New Yorker* was unable to reach the Salazar family, and a lawyer who has represented them in the past declined to comment.)

Some Indigenous communities in the mountains allied with the cartels, under duress or out of financial need, but a people known as the Rarámuri had a reputation for resisting interference. In 1997, when Breach was working as a reporter at one of Chihuahua City's daily newspapers, *El Diario de*



"Time for an update!"

PRENSA
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JUSTICIA
STICIA

An image of Breach became protest art when reporters gathered after her death to demand justice.

JOSÉ LUIS GONZÁLEZ / REUTERS / REDUX

Chihuahua, a group of Rarámuri and other resisters camped out in front of the attorney general's office, to protest having been exploited by a corrupt administrator. As Breach watched, the state police tried to disband the protest, their efforts soon turning violent. One of Breach's colleagues took a photograph of a policeman with his boot on the back of an Indigenous man who was face down and covered in blood.

The paper's news director, hoping to curry favor with the governor, refused to publish photographs of the protest that might incriminate the police. Infuriated by the censorship, Breach helped slip the photo of the man covered in blood to *La Jornada*, a far bigger paper. When the image appeared on its front page, and *El Diario* executives realized that it had been leaked, she was fired and marched out of the newsroom by security.

The story of how Breach, then the single mother of a young child, lost her job over a matter of journalistic principle circulated in media and activist circles. Mayorga was studying literature at the time, and remembers a friend thundering down a hallway at the university to tell her that Breach had been fired. "My friend had heart problems," she said. "He was so angry she'd been fired I worried he might collapse."

Not long afterward, *La Jornada* hired Breach, and her new editors supported her ambition to do serious reporting on the region where she grew up. In subsequent years, she produced work on femicides, international mining companies breaking environmental laws, politics, and narco turf wars. A piece from September, 2015, told with her trademark incisiveness, described a morning in which rivals of the Salazar cartel descended upon a town in the Chínipas municipality, one vehicle full of armed men after another, and summarily displaced three hundred families. Two men were murdered, a child was wounded, and other citizens were abducted as the mayor, Hugo Schultz, made himself scarce and the state attorney general said through a spokesperson that he knew of nothing amiss in the area. "Some neighbors hid in the hills; others escaped to the towns of San Bernardo, Álamos or Navojoa, Sonora," Breach wrote. "According to relatives of some of the displaced, 'not a soul remained by afternoon.'"

As dauntless as Breach's reporting seemed to others, she sometimes felt imperilled as she went about it, and in 2015 she decided to collaborate more with other reporters. She started her own news agency, eventually spending down her savings to pay the salaries of three other Chihuahua reporters. And she asked Mayorga if she'd like to team up.

Breach had been impressed by work on forced displacement that Mayorga had published in *Proceso*. Although they were nominally competitors, the two women agreed that they might be safer, and have a bigger impact, working together. Over the next two years, they documented how the cartels subdued the citizenry and expanded heroin and marijuana routes in multiple towns by handpicking political candidates and infiltrating police departments.

The nexus between drug traffickers and politicians, often called "narcopolitics," is an especially risky subject for journalists. And yet Breach and Mayorga showed in painstaking detail how cartel leaders were setting up candidates for local elections. After a statewide outcry, the PRI was forced to pull two candidates, one of whom was Adán and Crispín Salazar's nephew, Juan Miguel Salazar Ochoa, also known as Juanito. He had been running to become mayor of Chínipas.

As it turned out, the candidate selected to replace Juanito was reportedly close to the Salazars, too. Something Breach made plain to her readers was that candidate replacements represented only the illusion of change, just as the competing political parties offered only the illusion of choice. In her *Norte* column, Breach wrote, "The inhabitants of the Sierra have learned that political eras come and go, alternating PAN and PRI mayors without changing the underlying conditions of insecurity and violence and without touching the territorial control, economic and political influence that the region's narcos command."

As the pieces trickled out, spokespeople for both the PRI and the PAN tried to put a stop to them. Mayorga told me, "They said things like 'Stop covering this, *muchachitas*. You're putting yourselves at risk.'" A warning about the gravity of that risk was left in Breach's mailbox. Another attempt at intimidation, by phone, was overheard by her son. Yet another message, from a public official, insinuated that the well-being of her children was at stake, and an equally distressing communiqué was delivered to her through some of her relatives in Chínipas. The Salazars objected to her articles, the terrified relatives reported back to Breach, and her life and theirs were on the line.

Chínipas's mayor, Schultz, a square-jawed PAN stalwart, was among the politicians upset by her reporting. In 2016, she called him an "errand boy" of the narcos and noted that he'd chosen a nephew of Crispín Salazar as his chief of police. (The Chínipas police declined to comment.) Schultz had let Breach know that she could never set foot in the Sierra again.

He and other PAN officials were under pressure themselves, according to a recording of a phone call between Breach and Alfredo Piñera, the PAN spokesperson for the state at the time. In the recording, which was later recovered by state police, a nervous-sounding Piñera tells Breach that "they"—almost certainly the Salazars—suspect that Schultz and other PAN officials were sources for the story that got Juanito kicked off the ballot. "So if we, then, are able to prove that it wasn't us, then nothing will happen," Piñera said.

"Ask them why they're acting stupid," Breach replied briskly. When Juan Salazar's name appeared on a list of candidates, she told Piñera, she immediately recognized his connection to the cartel leadership. Still, narcos were going around threatening to harm people they suspected were her sources, as if the Salazar family tree were some big secret. She told Piñera, "Tell them this: There are no sources. Miroslava Breach knows Chínipas and every stone in the place." Before hanging up, she added, sounding exasperated, "If they want to hurt someone, let it be the reporter!"

Late on the day of Breach's murder, Mayorga went to her computer and pulled up notes from the final investigation they had worked on together. The story traced how narcos had infiltrated law enforcement in Chínipas and other towns in the Sierra. Breach had already published her account in *La Jornada*, but Mayorga had held off on doing the same in *Proceso*, hoping to ascertain a few more details. Now, her turmoil giving way to a flash of lucidity, she finished her work and published it—but only after removing her byline out of fear. Less than two weeks later, as rumors that she would also be killed spread, Mayorga fled Mexico, unsure when or if she could return.

The murders of Breach and Valdez and the exile of Mayorga had a chilling effect on colleagues left behind. Marcela Turati, one of the country's most renowned investigative journalists and editors, told me that it felt as though journalism itself was dying in Mexico.

Governor Corral seemed more optimistic, at least about his crusade to find Breach's killers. Less than a month after the murder, he said in an interview that "the material author, partners, and of course the intellectual author" of her killing had been identified, and that arrests were imminent. "We have practically all the elements to go and catch those responsible, and we are reinforcing the process and chain of custody with the greatest scientific, technical, and legal rigor," he said.

Corral wasn't a conventional figure on the Mexican political scene. He thought of himself as an erudite defender of the free press and democracy, and went around with his tie tucked into a sweater, like a professor. As 2017 progressed, though, there were times when he carried himself with the swagger of a TV detective.

In Mexico, the wall between the executive and judicial branches of government can be porous; governors, and even Presidents, often involve themselves in legal investigations. However, the intensity of Corral's involvement was unusual. In addition to heading to the crime scene on the morning of the murder, he personally asked for security-camera footage at nearby homes and businesses. He was also present three days after the murder as the police searched a modest house in a neighborhood twenty minutes from the crime scene. There, in the garage, was a gray Chevy Malibu with a ducktail spoiler and other detailing that matched the car that had been caught on the security cameras.

One inhabitant of the house, it turned out, was a university student with close ties to the Salazar family named Wilbert Jaciel Vega Villa. He had disappeared around the time that Breach was murdered, but Corral and the police seized what he'd left behind, including seven cell phones and a laptop. On the laptop were audio recordings of Breach, Mayorga, and Piñera, the PAN spokesperson, including the recording in which Breach made clear to Piñera that she wouldn't be intimidated.

In October, Corral told reporters that Breach's murderers were organized-crime leaders with a huge arsenal at their disposal and an ability to hide in remote areas, including outside the state, and that he had requested the federal government's help in picking them up. The following month, *Proceso* reported that the organized-crime leaders whom prosecutors believed to be responsible were Crispín

Salazar and his incarcerated brother, Don Adán.

Finally, on Christmas Day, 2017, Corral, seated in an ornately carved chair between the Mexican and Chihuahuan flags, had something definitive to say. After an investigation that involved upward of two hundred hours of surveillance videos, more than twenty informants, and extensive forensics, the “main director” of Breach’s murder had been found. It wasn’t Crispín Salazar or his brother after all. Rather, the mastermind was Juan Carlos Moreno Ochoa, the leader of a group of *sicarios*, or hit men, who served the family. Moreno Ochoa, who was known as El Larry, had been arrested that morning in Sonora. “The people of Chihuahua and all of Mexico know today that the crime against Miroslava Breach has a name, a face, and will not go unpunished,” Corral said firmly, hands folded on his empty desk. “The justice that has been demanded for so long will be done.”

KANSAS, 4 A.M.

The train brakes to take the bend behind the grain mill.

All night, at the motel, you listen to the ice machine’s cold labor.
Does it ever stop?

Thunk. No, says the vending machine as the next train goes by.

On the highway, the big rigs whine,
some carrying things that would kill you if one jackknifed
off the overpass.

The chicken truck passes with its load of small-brained misery.

You can’t hear the chickens, but you sort of think you can,
the way you can almost hear the sounds of the bar car on the train—

the bleary passengers trapped in their windows,

peering through their doppelgängers at the black
fields of wheat as they whiz past.

Childhood, did it ever exist?

Two days later, members of the press crowded into the state’s Center for Justice for a hearing on the case—Chihuahua’s first high-profile public trial involving a journalist’s murder. A decade earlier, Mexico’s Congress had voted to transform the country’s judicial system, which had been battered with accusations of corruption and wrongful convictions. It would do away with its “inquisitorial” approach (written trials mostly held behind closed doors where the accused was presumed to be guilty) and instead adopt an “adversarial” one (public trials before a judge—and without a jury—with a presumption of innocence). Chihuahua, like many states, had been making the transition gradually.

In advance of the proceedings, the state had produced a video summarizing what the prosecutor would call a “complete, clear, responsible, and results-based investigation.” The video showed workers in lab coats analyzing cartridges under microscopes, investigators scrutinizing a wall of surveillance screens, and police officers holding assault rifles and marching in formation. Among the things that the state had learned from all this diligence was that El Larry hadn’t pulled the trigger. The alleged *pistolero* had been one Ramón Andrés Zavala Corral, who had, unfortunately, turned up dead in Sonora the previous week. Nor, it seemed, had Adán or Crispín Salazar asked the hit man to do the terrible deed. Instead, according to media accounts, El Larry had been so eager to ingratiate himself with the Salazars that he’d arranged Breach’s murder on his own, as a gift. “There is no one above this person,” one of Corral’s top officials told the press.

El Larry wasn’t present in the courtroom when the prosecution began to lay out its version of the killing. He’d been injured during the arrest, and the day before the hearing enterprising reporters had found him on a cot inside the prison, swollen and bruised. He’d also been prevented from meeting with his defender, who seemed frustrated in the courtroom. He complained to the judge both about the violation of his client’s rights and about the fact that the state’s argument would be made in part by a succession of PAN officials who’d been granted anonymity in exchange for their testimony, despite evidence that several of them might be complicit.

The prosecution kept letting the names of these anonymous witnesses slip, and it soon became clear that among those helping the state secure El Larry’s conviction was Hugo Schultz, of Chínipas, whom Breach had called a lackey of the narcos. This development alarmed several of her confidantes, who knew that, shortly before her death, she had broken off her long friendship with Javier Corral, and that Schultz had been a primary cause.

The journalist and the governor had planned to fight corruption together. Following his inauguration, however, Breach began to have doubts about Corral’s New Dawn, and in the weeks before her death those doubts had spiralled. After Schultz had threatened her, according to two people who knew Breach and to a WhatsApp message she wrote at the time, she told Corral that her reporting on Chínipas might get her killed and that she needed his protection. Instead of offering it, Corral blindsided her by letting Schultz take a new post in his education department—a position coördinating the instruction of children throughout the Sierra region. To Breach, the betrayal felt devastating and total. Corral had

What about the bar your father drank in, giving you
endless quarters for pinball . . . There it goes,

carried aloft by a maniacal wind.

Before science, a lot of wind gods
blew things around. The dead went to live on the moon.

A man might be half scorpion, a woman half fish.

An omniscient, omnipotent stranger who looked
like Santa Claus and had a throne in outer space

knew everything about you, yet still somehow loved you unreasonably.

Another chunk of ice clunks into the bin.
Under your window, an insect in the bushes scrapes out its longing.

The sounds of the world at this late hour sadden you,

but then enters the rain, hastening down, the rain that wants
to touch everything

and almost does.

—*Kim Addonizio*

entrusted the futures of the young Indigenous people she'd been trying for decades to defend to a menacing narcopolitician. (Corral told *The New Yorker* that he and Breach had remained close until her death, that she had refused his offer of protection, and that they had never discussed Schultz.)

And now, in court, Schultz and other officials in Corral's party—officials whose cartel ties Breach had lambasted—were key witnesses in a prosecution that could, if successful, relieve top narcos, and themselves, of responsibility for her death. Although making recordings of courtroom proceedings is generally forbidden in the state of Chihuahua, a skeptical reporter in attendance nonetheless hit record on her phone. Soon afterward, to her surprise, the prosecutor began to read a vast amount of the state's investigative case file aloud.

This litany of facts—hours upon hours of evidence—would prove of great use to a small band of journalists, most of them women, who were fast losing confidence in the state's commitment to pursuing justice. As the new year began, these reporters started slipping into Chihuahua from all around the country, to secretly conduct a murder investigation of their own.

Some of the journalists participating in the parallel investigation had loved Miroslava Breach. Some had admired her courage but found her prickly. Some knew her only through her work. Each set aside other commitments to be part of an enterprise that Jan-Albert Hootsen, the Mexico representative for the Committee to Protect Journalists, describes as "absolutely unique in Mexican history." The reporters, who would ultimately grow to more than thirty in number, would name themselves the March 23rd Collective, for the day of Breach's murder.

A drafty two-story house in a middle-class neighborhood of Chihuahua City served as what they called their "investigative bunker." Journalists rotated in and out of it, the hard core among them staying for weeks. They pored over the hours of evidence that had been recorded at El Larry's public hearing, seized on leads that the state seemed to have dropped, and tried to pursue them surreptitiously, without attracting the attention of police or other officials.

Members of the collective, sharing a detailed account of their work for the first time, told me that from the beginning they operated as if the bunker were under surveillance by the cartels, the government, or both. A chart in the living room covered with colored Post-its of clues and suspects was positioned to be hidden fast, should strangers arrive at the door. Code names were used for critical actors, such as the Salazars. Even so, before comparing notes on investigative leads, the journalists would place their cell phones inside a canvas bag, which was deposited next to a blaring TV—"an old-school way to make sure no one was listening," as one collective member, John Gibler, said. (Gibler, an American investigative reporter who has written four books on Mexico, agreed to speak to me on the record, but for the sake of safety I've used pseudonyms to conceal the identities of the participating Mexican journalists.)

The ambient anxiety in the bunker was often leavened with humor—say, about how many hips would break when a team of mostly veteran journalists had to leap from the house's second-story windows. But jokes did nothing to erase the simple understanding that, if Breach could be killed without fear of reprisal, so could they.

María, an investigative reporter skilled at government-document searches, joined the collective to help it secure public records relevant to the case, including those detailing land holdings and criminal histories. Whenever she and her colleagues left the bunker or returned to it, they would settle on a cover story to use, should they be stopped by police or *sicarios*. One day, she and another woman in the collective frantically hid when they suspected a car of following them to the house. Another day, members were shaken when they believed someone had gone through their garbage. "We would have these moments of complete paranoia," María said. "But, honestly, it could have also been true."

Those in the collective taking the greatest risk, everyone understood, were the members who lived in Chihuahua. In much of the state, deep

FRIENDS WITH ACTUAL BENEFITS
Howard F. Paperwork? Bring it on.
Marlene K. Lives to move your car from one side of the street to the other.
Travis P. Changing cat litter is his passion.

investigative journalism had virtually ceased, leaving the citizenry with little reliable information about their leaders. Were they worthy of support, or corrupt and owned by the narcos? All that many citizens knew, or sensed, was that it wasn't safe for anyone to be asking such questions.

One day, a collective member named Karina told me, a military source warned a fellow-member of the group to stop trying to obtain information about Breach's murder. Just moments after that warning, the contacts and call history on the reporter's cell phone were wiped clean. According to the Citizen Lab, a watchdog group based in Canada, a powerful spyware tool called Pegasus was then being used in Mexico—likely by the government—to surveil journalists and hack into their phones. (Mexican officials have steadfastly denied this charge.) Remote wiping might have been a bug in the spyware, a Citizen Lab analyst told *The New Yorker*. At the time, the collective understood enough to be terrified, and a therapist who was brought in to help members cope with the soaring anxiety could calm them only so much.

As 2018 progressed, López Obrador—a left-wing populist who shared with the former U.S. President Donald Trump a habit of attacking the media—campaigned for the Mexican Presidency, drawing large crowds; in July, he won by a landslide. In Chihuahua, as the trial of El Larry was delayed because of requests for injunctions by the defense and debates over jurisdiction, Corral publicly accused the federal government of doing little to help apprehend other Salazar cartel members who he believed were involved in Breach's murder. ("To date," Corral told *The New Yorker*, "they enjoy broad protection among security forces of different levels of government.") And the members of the collective kept trying, very quietly, to untangle the facts surrounding the killing.

The role of Ana, a photojournalist from Mexico City, was to help the collective create a list of people who might have had reasons to want Breach silenced. This responsibility entailed travelling to communities where she had reported and figuring out whose interests she might have threatened in the mining, timber, and ranching industries, as well as in the cartels.

Accompanied by a human-rights attorney, Ana first travelled to Baqueachi, a Rarámuri community in the Sierra where Breach had documented the struggle of residents to regain their land after decades of encroachment by cattle ranchers. An activist fighting that battle had been murdered, and Breach's 2010 account in *La Jornada* of the killing and the community's fight for survival ultimately helped the residents reclaim their rights to the land. When community members learned that Ana was there to find out who had killed Breach, they grew emotional. "They held a ceremony for her, and I came to understand that they viewed her as a member of their community," Ana said. "This is not something that happens—an isolated Indigenous community accepting an outsider on such terms."

From Baqueachi, Ana went to Madera, a town riven by conflicts between the Sinaloa and the Juárez cartels, and then to a community that had lost much of its water supply to cartels and wealthy families with political connections. As Ana absorbed the intricacies of Breach's reporting, she grew impatient with an idea that some politicians and even journalists had espoused: that Breach hadn't fully grasped the impact her reporting would have and had got in over her head. "She was a journalist who understood perfectly well what the risks were," Ana told me. "As journalists, we're in all the wrong places, with all the wrong people, because that is our job." For decades, Breach had been on the road connecting dots, exposing wrongdoing, and challenging powerful interests. Any number of the stories she had pursued could have doomed her.

Cartel hit men have a tradition of editorializing their work, often by leaving messages on their victims, and right after Breach was killed a cardboard sign turned up at the crime scene. It blamed Breach's death not on the Salazars but on one of the cartel's enemies: Carlos Arturo Quintana, known as El 80, whom the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency has called a leader of the Juárez cartel. (That Quintana had a grievance against Breach was entirely plausible: in 2016, she had revealed Quintana's attempt to appoint mayoral candidates, including his mother-in-law.) Another sign materialized beside the body of a retired martial-arts instructor who had been shot in the head. It claimed that *he* was the person who killed Breach.

Under federal law in Mexico, families of victims are theoretically allowed to review investigative files in criminal cases, in order to see for themselves what police and prosecutors are doing to bring about justice. But, as leads multiplied and crisscrossed in the Breach case, her siblings found themselves thwarted by the state when they tried to gain access to the file. Losing faith in Corral, they petitioned for federal intervention in the case, securing it in April, 2018, with the help of Sara Mendiola Landeros, the director of Propuesta Cívica, a legal organization that defends human-rights activists and journalists. The siblings also finally received a copy of the state's investigative file and shared its contents with the collective, according to Karina and Gibler. (The siblings declined through Mendiola to comment for this article, citing their need for "emotional tranquillity and security." Breach's daughter also declined to comment.)

Examining the thick file, collective members were shocked at what wasn't in it: any indication that a state investigator had travelled to Chínipas, the place from which direct and indirect threats had been coming steadily in Breach's final months. (Corral told *The New Yorker* that the state investigation was not yet finished when the federal government intervened.) Nor, it appeared to the collective, had tough questions been posed to the PRI and PAN officials who had warned Breach and Mayorga to stop reporting.

"There's this myth that reporting on the cartels gets you killed," Gibler told me. "And yes, it can, if you publish specific information about who is doing what and where. But, if you look at the majority of the more than one hundred journalists killed in the last decade in Mexico, most of them were working on stories about the collaboration between the political state apparatus and organized crime." Breach had done that work "very explicitly," he added. "First and last names, and names of criminal groups and political officials."

Collective members had long suspected Hugo Schultz, the former Chínipas mayor who had warned Breach never to return to her home town, of having a role in her killing. So, when Gibler and three other members of the collective chanced upon Schultz at a congressional hearing on education in the state capital, they decided that they owed it to Breach to confront and question him themselves—even if it meant they'd be recognized and their identities revealed to the cartel.

When the hearing concluded, Schultz, in dark glasses, entered an elevator with his smiling wife and two bodyguards, and the collective members crowded in, too. A video taken by one of them shows the face of Schultz's wife fall as another member asks the politician, "You gave [the Salazars] the recording—why did you give them the recording? We just want your side of the story." Schultz hesitated, then replied, with controlled civility, "I have nothing to say, Miss." Before stepping out, he added, "I am not hiding, I am working— I am coöperating with the government."

Later, the elevator ride would seem to encapsulate the quixotic wishfulness at the heart of the collective's project: journalists, already vulnerable, had made themselves more vulnerable still, with little to show for it. The reporters chased after the politician's entourage for a few minutes, "but then," Gibler told me, "we had to let them go."

In some newspapers, elements of the state's version of the plot to murder Breach—that the killing had been orchestrated by El Larry, the *sicario* chief—seemed to lock into place with uncanny precision. One of those elements involved a pilot named Jorge David Coughanour Buckenhofer, who owned a regional air-taxi service that connected Chihuahua City to other parts of the state.

After El Larry was captured, *El Heraldo de Chihuahua* published several stories alleging, without apparent evidence, that Coughanour also worked for the Salazar cartel and had whisked the supposed mastermind to Chínipas on his plane after the murder. The flight to the mountains had ended tragically, the newspaper said: as Coughanour landed, he accidentally hit and killed two girls who had been hanging out on the runway, and he then fled the scene in his plane.

Collective members secured a state forensic report, with photos, indicating that two girls had indeed died that night—but with small wounds on their heads that were inconsistent with being hit by a plane. The collective's suspicions were further aroused by the fact that Coughanour was unavailable for questioning, either about those deaths or about the getaway flight after Breach's murder. One evening a few weeks after she was killed, a car had pulled alongside Coughanour's Mercedes, where he was seated with a friend in front of an Italian restaurant in Chihuahua City. Within moments, the pilot was shot at least six times through the driver's-side window.

Months later, Gibler visited Coughanour's family and discovered that they were anguished not just because of his murder, or because he'd been called a narcopilot in the paper, but because the notion that he had run over bystanders while landing impugned his skills. A volunteer air-ambulance pilot, Coughanour had a reputation for safety so impeccable that he'd been chosen to fly the state's most important political figures, among them Javier Corral when he was running for governor.

Coughanour's father shared with the collective the investigative file he'd received from the police. Law enforcement didn't get a warrant for footage from a security camera outside the restaurant, and the responding homicide detective—who was also a detective in the Breach investigation—questioned only two witnesses at the scene. Gibler came to believe that state officials had no desire to determine who had killed

Coughanor, and to what end. Their real goal, he thought, was to give the public a hard-to-refute story of how El Larry had commissioned a pilot to help him elude the police, in order to stop more penetrating questions from being asked.

Gibler told me that Coughanour's father said to him one day, "Even you are here because of that journalist's murder, not because of my son." Gibler had replied, ruefully, "I'm sorry, but yes, you're right."

In 2010, an agency of the Mexican government was created to do what the March 23rd Collective would later try to do on its own: conduct a rigorous investigation of the facts when a journalist is murdered. The Special Prosecutor's Office for Attention to Crimes Committed Against Freedom of Expression, known as FEADLE, was given the power to assume control of a state-level case if there appeared to be a connection between a journalist's reporting and her death. By 2019, a FEADLE prosecutor was in control of the Breach case. El Larry's trial was to resume later in the year, and Corral's prosecutors had handed over state files.

FEADLE's track record was something short of inspiring: since its founding, according to reports from the attorney general's office, only one of FEADLE's murder investigations had resulted in a conviction. But, after complaints from journalists and activists, an ambitious new prosecutor, Ricardo Sánchez Pérez del Pozo, had been hired. He had a graduate degree in human rights from Northwestern University, in Illinois, and had cut his teeth on the United Nations tribunal on war crimes in the Balkans.

At this point, collective members were exhausted. They needed to take a break and refocus on their paying jobs and families, instead of continuing a parallel investigation with many risks and no legal authority. The U.N., Reporters Without Borders, C.P.J., and other organizations were also doing what they could to keep the public from forgetting the case, and surely with that outside pressure FEADLE would now ask probing questions in Salazar territory.

However, when collective members met with Sánchez Pérez del Pozo, they were dismayed that he wouldn't confirm that his investigators would be braving the mountains to ask questions. (The prosecutor told me that it would imperil his investigators to say anything about where they went.) As the federal investigation of the murder of a reporter who exposed links between politicians and drug traffickers appeared to tiptoe around both groups, demoralized collective members decided there was only one thing left to do: rest, recover, and then write the hell out of everything they had learned about the plot to kill Miroslava Breach.

"I may be emotionally unavailable, but the rest of me can be found right here, twenty-four seven."

When a celebrated Colombian journalist, María Teresa Ronderos, heard about the emotional and investigative difficulties that collective members had faced, she was determined to help. Ronderos understood the personal toll of this kind of reporting better than most: she had worked through the nineteen-eighties and nineties in Colombia, when reporting in many regions was perilous, and later she contributed to an investigation by Colombian journalists of the 2002 murder of the political columnist and editor Orlando Sierra Hernández—a project whose example had inspired some in the March 23rd Collective. Ronderos had since co-founded the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism, in Costa Rica, and offered her Mexican counterparts its assistance, she said, "so that they did not feel so alone."

Before long, Ronderos had also secured the support of two other organizations. Bellingcat—an independent investigative group based in the Netherlands, which is famous for its stories about Russian wrongdoing under Vladimir Putin—would help the collective do a last push for open-source intelligence research. Forbidden Stories—a nonprofit formed after the Charlie Hebdo massacre, in Paris, to continue the work of journalists who have been assassinated, jailed, or threatened—would help promote and distribute the collective's findings in English and French as well as Spanish.

In September, 2019, nearly two years after a journalist made an illicit courtroom recording of the state's evidence, the March 23rd Collective published three investigative stories. The first piece documented how state and federal prosecutors ignored leads about Salazar operatives and PAN officials, including Schultz. The second examined suspicious murders and police failures linked to the Breach investigation, including the filed-away killing of Jorge David Coughanour. The final installment probed Breach's work and the death threats against her. More than seventy publications in Mexico and around the world published the stories. Ronderos said, "One of the first questions everyone wanted to know is: who's behind this anonymous collective?"—the question contributors were, of course, most reluctant to answer.

Sara Mendiola and Sánchez Pérez del Pozo told me that they lamented the timing of the stories, which had named and therefore endangered witnesses in the case of El Larry, the *sicario* leader, whose trial had been about to resume. But Hootsen, the Mexico representative of C.P.J., gives the collective credit for bringing international attention to the case at a critical moment.

In February, 2020, El Larry's oft-delayed trial resumed. "Not only was Miroslava's life affected," Sánchez Pérez del Pozo said in his arguments, "but also society's right to know these facts that, without Miroslava's courage, we Mexicans would not have otherwise known." El Larry was convicted of premeditated murder, and that summer he received a sentence of fifty years in prison.

What came next from the office of Sánchez Pérez del Pozo was a genuine surprise to many people, including members of the collective: he issued an arrest warrant for Hugo Schultz as an accessory to Breach's murder. In 2021, the former PAN official pleaded guilty, ultimately receiving eight years in prison for helping the Salazars get information on Breach in order to target her.

Schultz declined to testify in his trial, but a son of Crispín Salazar had talked. In jail and facing charges of kidnapping a woman and holding her for ransom, Crispín's son, Édgar, began to hear rumors that authorities might implicate him in Breach's murder and that his own family had placed a hit on him. He decided to turn, he told the judge. Shortly before being transferred to a prison outside the state, he testified that control of the town of Chínipas was essential to the cartel's ability to smuggle narcotics through Sonora and into the United States, and that Breach's exposure of the cartel's plan to install friendly mayors and police chiefs in Chínipas and other municipalities in the region had jeopardized its goal of a frictionless route into the American market. Schultz, whom Édgar identified as a daily presence at the Salazar-family compound, became part of the operation to solve the problem.

Cartel leaders had initially hoped that a campaign of threats might scare Breach off, and one of Schultz's assignments was to gather more information about her. Schultz admitted recruiting to this effort other PAN officials. These included José Luévano, whom Corral would hire soon afterward as his personal secretary, and Piñera, the party spokesperson. Luévano declined to respond to my specific questions on the ground that the case is still open. Piñera also declined to answer specific questions and said that he bore no responsibility for Breach's murder and had never been in touch with the cartel. But one bit of information Piñera admitted collecting and giving to Schultz had helped seal Breach's fate: the recording of the phone call between Piñera and Breach in which she said that she knew every stone in Chínipas and would not be deterred.

Schultz passed the recording on to the Salazars, the investigation showed, and after hearing Breach's voice the cartel set in motion a new plan to silence it. This plan would be the subject of yet another warrant the FEADLE prosecutor would secure, for the arrest of Crispín Salazar. The charge would be murder.

By Édgar Salazar's account, Crispín had become alarmed by the "dirt" that Breach was stirring up—sufficiently alarmed that, according to the prosecution, he sent an emissary to the prison where his elder brother was being held to discuss the problem. Édgar testified that, shortly afterward, on the family's porch, with El Larry and other trusted associates gathered round, Crispín Salazar made the decision to take Breach's life.

Édgar told the judge that he was present when the chief of *sicarios* returned from Chihuahua City, found the cartel leader in the middle of a large and raucous Salazar-family birthday party, and told him the job was done. "Good," Crispín said, and then burst into laughter.

In 2022, C.P.J. documented an unprecedented number of journalist murders in Mexico, and underlying that fact was an even uglier one: the government's failure to aggressively investigate earlier cases had helped produce the record-setting death toll. It's not outlandish to think that collaborations like the March 23rd Collective will help shape the future in the opposite way, by demonstrating how a culture of impunity sometimes weakens under scrutiny.

The Forbidden Stories founder, Laurent Richard, a documentary filmmaker, told me that his organization's minor role in the pursuit of Breach's killers had inspired a second collaboration with journalists in Mexico, this one investigating the 2012 murder of Regina Martínez Pérez, a *Proceso* correspondent. "A journalist killed in Mexico is not only a Mexican crime," he said. "Because the drug cartels are multinational corporations."

Ana, the photojournalist, told me that working as part of the March 23rd Collective allowed her and others to accomplish more than they would have been able to on their own, and she's optimistic that the model will prove useful elsewhere. "So many journalists are afraid of being killed, afraid to continue investigating. We see this in El Salvador or Guatemala or Nicaragua, too," she said. "But working together we can expose corruption without having to flee our countries. With less risk. And that gives us hope."

In addition to sending El Larry and Schultz to prison, Sánchez Pérez del Pozo has had success in several other cases, including securing two murder convictions for the killing of Breach's colleague, the investigative reporter Javier Valdez. However, more than a year after FEADLE issued its warrant for the arrest of Crispín Salazar, federal law enforcement has yet to bring him into custody. In other words, the work of the collective is not finished. And perhaps even the members' decision to speak to me is one more covert action on behalf of a journalist for whom partial justice would be an unworthy ending. ♦

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

FAMILY VALUES

How a mother's love for her gay son started a revolution.

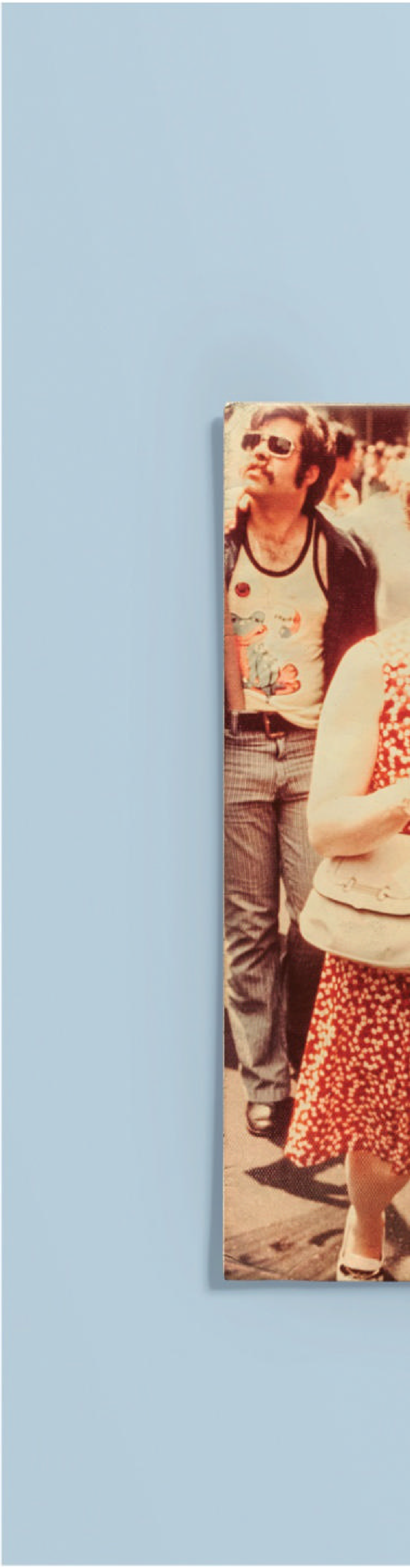
BY KATHRYN SCHULZ

The crowd along Sixth Avenue was losing its mind. It was Sunday, June 25, 1972, and Dr. Benjamin Spock was walking uptown with the Christopher Street Liberation Day March, the scrappier, more revolutionary precursor to the New York City Pride Parade. Although he had risen to fame as a pediatrician, Spock was almost as well known for his support of left-wing causes—from legalizing abortion to ending the Vietnam War—as he was for "The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care," which had already sold more than ten million copies. Still, even by his standards, joining the Christopher Street crowd was a radical act. Two years earlier, when the march was held for the first time, its organizers had worried that no one would come. Those who did were so hopped up on adrenaline and fear that the fifty-block route, from the West Village to Central Park, took them half as long as anticipated; afterward, they jokingly called it the Christopher Street Liberation Day Run. Now here was Dr. Spock, one of the most influential figures in America, joining their ranks. As he passed by, the people lining the streets whistled and clapped and screamed themselves hoarse.

But all this hullabaloo was not, as it turned out, for the famous doctor; it was for a diminutive middle-aged woman marching just in front of him. She was not famous at all—not the author of any books, not the leader of any movement, not self-evidently a radical of any kind. With her jacket and brooch and plaid skirt and spectacles, she had the part-prim, part-warm demeanor of an old-fashioned elementary-school teacher, which she was. She was carrying a piece of orange poster board with a message hand-lettered in black marker: "PARENTS OF GAYS: UNITE IN SUPPORT FOR OUR CHILDREN." She had no idea that the crowd was cheering for her until total strangers started running up to thank her. They asked if they could kiss her; they asked if she would talk to their parents; they told her that they couldn't imagine their own mothers and fathers supporting them so publicly, or supporting them at all.

The woman's name was Jeanne Manford, and she was marching alongside her twenty-one-year-old gay son, Morty. Moved by the outpouring of emotion, the two of them discussed it all along the route. By the time they reached Central Park, they had also reached a decision: if so many people wished that someone like Jeanne could talk to their parents, why not make that possible? The organization they dreamed up that day, which started as a single support group in Manhattan, was initially called Parents of Gays; later, it was renamed Parents FLAG, for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; nowadays, it is known only as PFLAG. Just a handful of people attended its first meeting, held fifty years ago this spring. Today, it has four hundred chapters and well north of a quarter of a million members.

That growth reflects a cultural change of extraordinary speed and magnitude—a transformation, incomplete but nonetheless astonishing, in the legal, political, and social status of L.G.B.T.Q. people in America. Paradoxically, one consequence of that transformation is that the moral courage of Jeanne Manford, so evident to everyone lining Sixth Avenue that day, has become hard to fully appreciate. Parents in general, and mothers in particular, have long been a potent political force, from the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina to Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Moms Demand Action. In such cases, the power of parents derives from



SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY SUZANNE SWAN; FRED W. MCDARRAH / GETTY

When Morty Manford came out, in 1968,

PARENTS OF GAYS:
UNITE
RT OF
LDREN
IM PROUD OF MY GAY SON
EAD
U.S. ARMY

homosexual acts were criminal in forty-nine states. Instead of trying to change him, his mother set out to change the world.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TYLER COMRIE

loving their children and trying to protect them, among the most fundamental and respected of human instincts. What made Jeanne Manford different—and what made her actions so consequential—is that, until she started insisting otherwise, the kind of child she had was widely regarded as the kind that not even a mother could love.

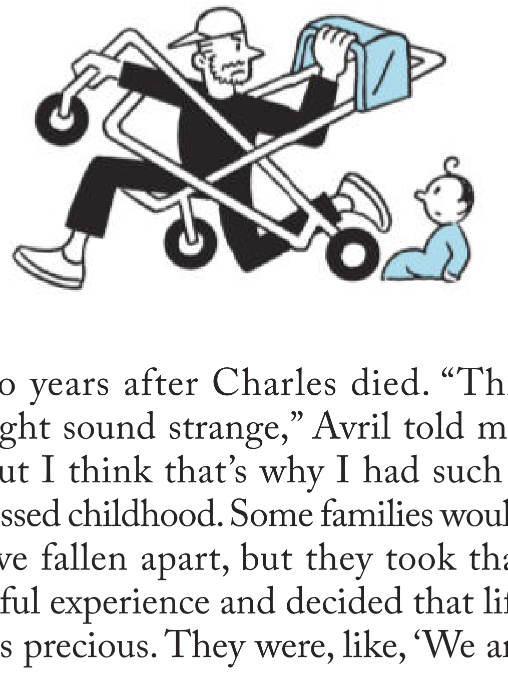
Jeanne Manford was born Jean Sobelson in Flushing, Queens, in 1920; her parents added the extra letters to her name when she started school, to distinguish her from another Jean in her class, a little boy. She was the middle of five daughters and, in a family of large personalities, the quiet one—two facts that might have contributed to her lifelong sense of being utterly average. Her father was a salesman; her mother, a nurse, was so overprotective that, well past the appropriate age, she would not let her girls cross the street without holding hands. When it came time to go to college, Manford, a New York Jew, chose the University of Alabama, a brief swerve in her life that was cut short by the sudden death of her father. Devastated by the loss—the first of many family tragedies that she would face—she dropped out and returned to Queens.

Back home, she met Jules Manford, a dentist, and after she married him they settled first into a small apartment and eventually into a modest house in Flushing, less than a mile from where she had grown up. In 1944, they had a son, Charles, followed three years later by a daughter, Suzanne. Morty, their third and final child, was born in 1950. By the time Jules turned forty, he had suffered multiple heart attacks; he survived, but his health never fully recovered. As a hedge against disaster, Jeanne went back to college and got a degree in teaching. For the next three decades, she worked as an elementary-school teacher at P.S. 32, down the block from her home.

By all accounts, Morty was the superstar of the Manford family. Kids liked him, adults adored him, and his teachers predicted that he would someday be a senator. Early on, he displayed an instinct for speaking out, part sincere, part prankish. At fourteen, he wrote a letter to the New York City Council about "co-ed socialization in the Junior and Senior High schools"; later, after a can of Progresso tomato paste exploded when he opened it, he sent the company a complaint, detailing the damage it caused and requesting reimbursement, then mailed carbon copies to, among others, the New York City Health Department, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Ralph Nader.

But, for all his outward accomplishments, Morty was inwardly wretched. By the time he was in high school, he was fighting what he later called "a personal civil war" over his sexual orientation, and eventually he asked his parents if he could see a psychiatrist. They were surprised—he had always seemed like a happy, well-adjusted kid—but they readily agreed, and when the first one didn't work out they found him another. Meanwhile, the Manfords' older son, by then in college, was struggling as well. Charles had always been bright but volatile, and in the fall semester of 1965 he slashed his arms in his dorm room and was rushed to the infirmary. Four months later, at the age of twenty-one, he took his own life.

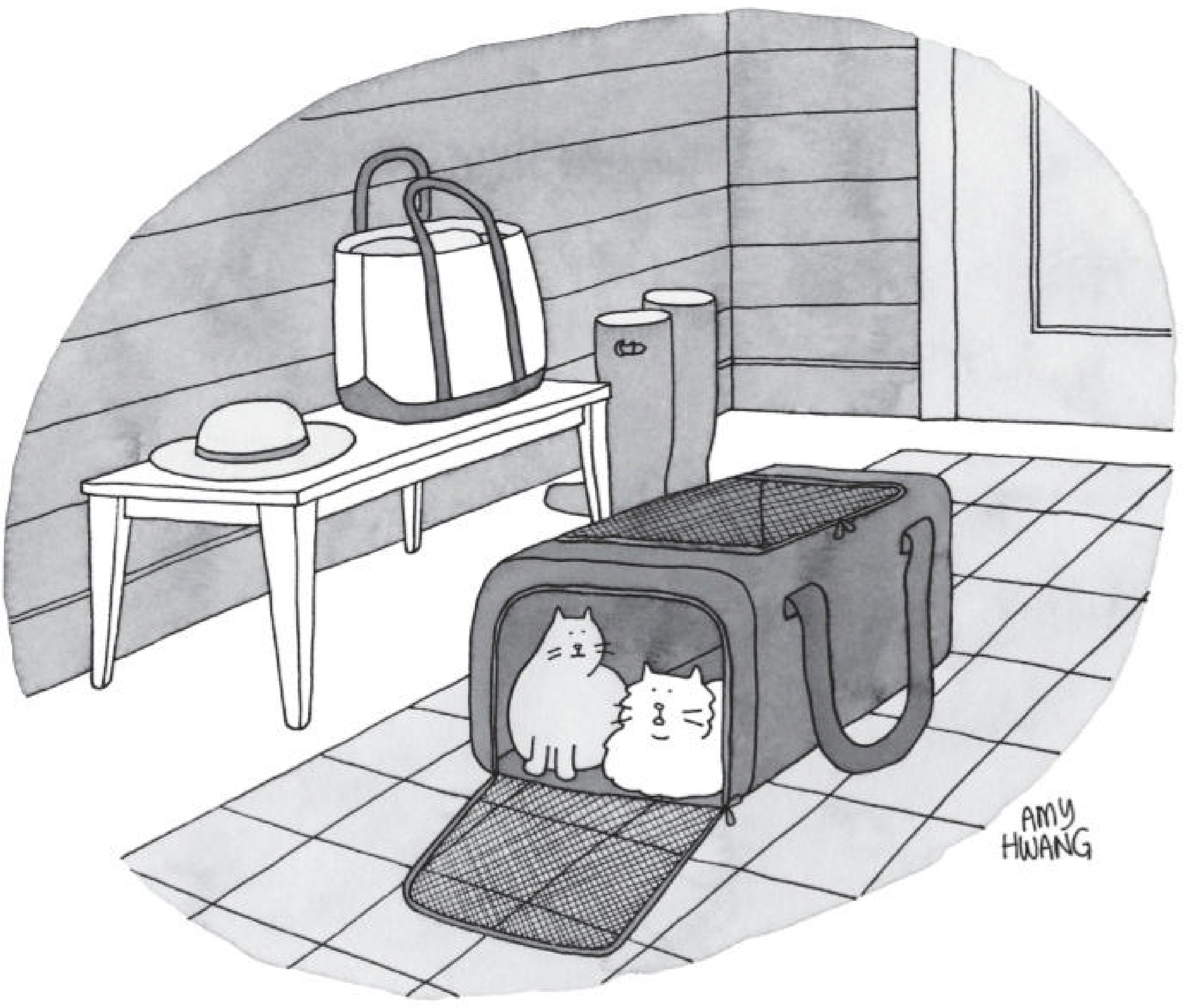
The Manfords, undone, channelled their grief into love. When their daughter, Suzanne, got pregnant, she moved back home so that her parents could help raise the child—a girl, Avril, born two years after Charles died. "This might sound strange," Avril told me. "But I think that's why I had such a blessed childhood. Some families would have fallen apart, but they took that awful experience and decided that life was precious. They were, like, 'We are going to take care of who we have.'" This admirable commitment was put to the test soon enough. The same year Avril was born, Morty's psychiatrist summoned Jeanne and Jules to his office and informed them that their beloved golden boy and sole surviving son was gay.



To the best of her knowledge, Jeanne Manford had never known anyone who was gay. Born and raised in one of the more conservative quarters of New York City (not by accident was Flushing the fictional home of Archie Bunker), she had lived almost all her adult life there as well, and spent most of the nineteen-fifties at home raising her children. She knew how to cook; she knew how to knit; she knew how to make a house guest feel at home. She was soft-spoken, with an accent that aspired upward, toward the patrician—half Queen's English, half Queens. Her clothes were fashionable without being flashy; her hair was always done just so. "I considered myself such a traditional person," she once said of her life before Morty was outed, "that I didn't even cross the street against the light."

There was no mystery about what that kind of traditional, law-abiding woman was supposed to think about gay people in 1968. At the time, homosexual acts were criminal in forty-nine states, with punishments ranging from fines to prison time, including life sentences. Same-sex attraction was classified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association and routinely mocked and condemned by everyone from elementary-school kids to elected officials. Those who lost their jobs, homes, or children owing to their sexual orientation had no legal recourse. Political organizing was virtually impossible—one early gay-rights group that attempted to officially incorporate in New York was told that its mere existence would violate state sodomy laws—and positive cultural representation was all but nonexistent; there were no openly gay or lesbian politicians, pundits, religious leaders, actors, athletes, or musicians in the mainstream. Newspapers used the words "homosexual" and "pervert" interchangeably, and the handful of gay people who appeared on television to discuss their "life style" almost always had their faces hidden in shadows or otherwise obscured. In 1974, when "The Pat Collins Show" aired a segment on parents of gay children, the host introduced it by saying, "Even if he committed murder, I guess you'd say, 'Well, he's still my child, no matter what.' But suppose your child came to you and said, 'Mother, Dad, I am homosexual.' What would you do then?"

You could fit most of the solar system into the chasm between how the average American of the era would have reacted in that hypothetical situation and how Jeanne Manford responded upon learning that Morty was gay. She was dismayed to discover that his sexual orientation had troubled him for so long, but she herself was not concerned about it. Not for a moment did she entertain the possibility that something was wrong with him. Not for a moment did she wonder, as the otherwise supportive Jules initially did, if his gayness reflected some failing of theirs as parents. And not for a moment did she worry about how other people would react; she told her sisters and friends right away, making plain that she was fine with the information and they had better be, too. "You don't love him in spite of something," she later declared on national television, her face free of shadow or blur. "You love him."



"It doesn't matter. They give us the same food no matter where we are."

• •

At first, Morty could not accept his parents' acceptance. In the early days, when he was still struggling with self-loathing, it seemed impossible to believe that everyone else wasn't similarly disgusted by him. Later, after he went to college at Columbia and came to terms with being gay, the steady, unfussy love of his family seemed tepid compared with his own increasing radicalism. The first time he attended a gay-rights protest, he wore sunglasses and turned away from the news cameras, but he soon became, his sister Suzanne (now Suzanne Manford Swan) told me, "unafraid and unstoppable." An eighteen-year-old regular at the Stonewall Inn, Morty was there when a fight broke out between patrons and the police in the summer of 1969, an event that catalyzed the gay-rights movement. The following year, after joining the brand-new Gay Activists Alliance, he began organizing political demonstrations, then dropped out of college to do so full time. Not long after, he was arrested for refusing to move when police tried to shoo him off a stoop on Christopher Street, the heart of the Greenwich Village gay scene. (It was two in the morning before he was allowed to make a phone call. Reluctant to ring up his parents, he instead called a congressional candidate sympathetic to the G.A.A.: Bella Abzug, the firebrand feminist who would help introduce the first federal gay-rights bill.) Later, he and a friend "went out like Johnny Appleseeds" and, with the G.A.A. covering the gas money, travelled to cities and towns throughout the South to raise awareness about gay liberation.

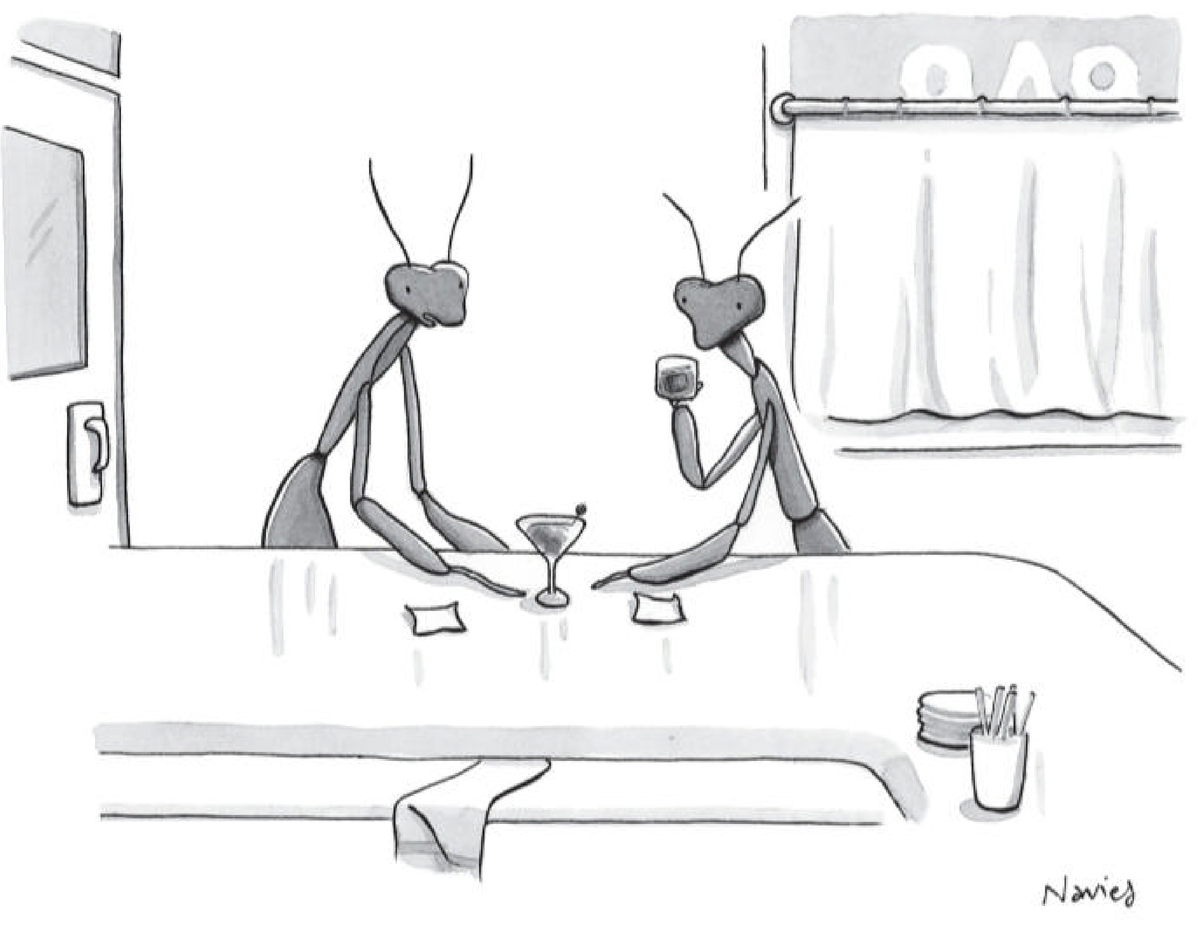
Meanwhile, Jeanne was clipping and saving Morty's every newspaper appearance, including many that few other parents would have cared to put in a scrapbook. (One of them, from the *Times*, featured him being ejected from a benefit for John Lindsay, the mayor of New York City, after shouting, "Justice for homosexuals!") This pride in her son proved strategic, because it meant that she could never be baited or shamed. The next time Morty wound up in jail, Jeanne *was* woken up by an early-morning phone call—not from him but from the arresting officer, who, apparently expecting to ruin Morty's life, made a show of asking Jeanne if she knew that her son was "a homosexual." Morty was there to witness the officer's confusion and deflation when she said, "Yes, I know. Why are you bothering him? Why don't you go after criminals and stop harassing the gays?"

Still, for all her bravura, Jeanne worried constantly about her son. The possibility that he would be attacked for being gay "was always in the back of my mind," she said—until the day when it was suddenly at the forefront. In the spring of 1972, the New York *Daily News* ran an editorial, headlined "Any Old Jobs for Homos?," that referred to "fairies, nances, swishes, fags, lezzes" and commended the Supreme Court for deciding that a public university could rescind a job offer to a man who applied for a marriage license with his male partner. (The same couple were the plaintiffs in Baker v. Nelson, a 1971 court case that found no constitutional obligation to recognize same-sex marriages, which remained legal precedent until the Supreme Court's 2015 ruling in Obergefell v. Hodges.) That editorial coincided with the annual Inner Circle dinner, a parody show hosted by New York City journalists, which that year was slated to include a mocking skit about a gay-rights bill. Fed up with the press's treatment of L.G.B.T.Q. issues, the G.A.A. decided to protest the event.

Among those attending the protest and handing out leaflets was Morty Manford. Among those enraged by it was Michael Maye, the head of the New York City firefighters' union and a former professional heavyweight boxer. With multiple police officers looking on, Maye allegedly attacked several of the demonstrators, including Morty, punching them, kicking them, stomping them in the groin, and throwing at least one of them down an escalator. This time, the phone call Jeanne Manford got about her son was from the hospital.

There were ultimately no real consequences for Maye, despite multiple witnesses, including high-ranking city officials, and a prolonged effort to bring him to justice in court. But there were enormous consequences for the country as a whole. "You would meet Jeanne Manford and you would never in a million years guess what she had in her," Eric Marcus, the author of the 1992 book "Making Gay History" and now the host of a podcast by the same name, told me. "But as I came to know her I always felt that what was in her mind was 'Don't fuck with my Morty.'" Incensed by the attack, she sat down and wrote a letter to the editor condemning both the perpetrators and the police officers who stood by and let it happen. Then she went on to express a sentiment never before aired in a mainstream publication: "I am proud of my son, Morty Manford, and the hard work he has been doing in urging homosexuals to accept their feelings." She sent the letter to multiple newspapers, including the *Times*. Only the New York *Post*—in its last waning days as a liberal paper, before its purchase, a few years later, by Rupert Murdoch—agreed to publish it.

That letter made Morty realize, finally, that his mother was not just tolerating her gay son. And when throngs of friends and acquaintances called him up to say that Jeanne's words had stunned them and given them hope for the future, it made him realize something else, too. As crucial as his own activism was, what his mother had done—what she *could* do, as a mother, that he could not—was just as important. The organizer in him took note. It was April of 1972, two months before the Christopher Street Liberation Day March. Morty asked her if she would join him there. Yes, she said, but the emerging organizer in *her* had one condition. There was no point in going if no one knew why she was there; she wanted to carry a sign.



"Sometimes I go on dates just for the free meal."

The first meeting of Parents of Gays was held nearly a year later, on March 11, 1973. To reach parents directly, the Manfords placed an ad in the *Village Voice;* to reach them indirectly, through their children, Morty and the lesbian activist Barbara Love descended on New York City's gay hangouts with fifteen hundred signs and leaflets, handmade and possessing something of the intimate, supplicant look of lost-pet posters. At the invitation of the Reverend Edward Egan, who was later forced into retirement because he was gay, the meeting was held at the Metropolitan-Duane United Methodist Church, in the West Village. In addition to Jeanne and Jules, Morty and Love were present to answer questions that the parents in attendance might not be comfortable asking their own daughters and sons.

At the time, most parents of gay or lesbian children were in a supremely difficult position. Those who were conflicted enough to come to a meeting—rather than, say, refusing to talk about their kid or refusing to talk *to* their kid or organizing an exorcism—loved their children but also experienced them as sources of grief, shame, and confusion. They were full of questions, many of them ignorant but all of them sincere: about whether their gay son would get more effeminate every year; about how their "beautiful blonde daughter, just nineteen" could possibly be a lesbian. And they were often punished for seeking answers. "I had no one to talk to but the psychiatrists," one mother of three gay children recalled. "And every one of them said I had sick children."

For mothers and fathers like these, Parents of Gays was both a gift and a shock. Most people who came to a meeting expected, as Morty later said, to sit there weeping while someone patted their hand and said, "Now, now, dearie." They did not expect to be told that the kids were all right and society was all wrong. "As parents of gay persons," some of the organization's earliest informational material read, "we have learned to recognize our children's expression of love as honest and moral." Even that was only the half of it, because Jeanne had always understood that acceptance wasn't enough. "We will fight for the rights of our children," she once said. "We will become political. We will have a national organization. I remember thinking that at the very beginning." In essence, she founded a support group that was really a civil-rights organization—one that took the idea of traditional family values, so often wielded against queer people, and mobilized it on their behalf.

There was a cost to doing so, of course. The Manfords' home number was listed in the phone book, and Jeanne's full name had been printed in the New York *Post*. Someone threw a rock through the window of their house; someone made rude comments to Avril, then just twelve or thirteen, about her uncle and grandparents. People sent letters addressed to "the misguided Parents of Gays" and quoted Scripture to prove that these "degrading, repulsive feelings are wrong and against nature." If any of this bothered Jeanne, she never showed it. When the principal of the elementary school where she worked told her that people were starting to talk and asked her to be more discreet, Jeanne informed the woman that her professional life was one thing and her private life was another and that she would do as she pleased.

Mostly, though, the people who reached out to the Manfords and to Parents of Gays were looking for help or community or a balm for heartbreaking pain. A Lutheran pastor wrote to say that he had lost his parish after coming out—although at least by doing so he had enabled a congregant to finally reveal the reason for her son's suicide. A young man wrote to say he was afraid that if he came out his parents would either be fired from the Baptist college where they worked or resign in shame. A grandmother in Norman, Oklahoma, wrote seeking advice on how to reconcile her intolerant daughter with her lesbian granddaughter, both of whom were full of "hate and hostility and can't communicate and yet I think they love each other." A man wrote to say, "May God bless you for all the good things you are doing. You make us gays very proud." A mother of a gay son wrote anonymously to say, "A woman in the office where I work said she thought all homosexuals should be put in prison. Hardly a day goes by that I can't hear someone make a nasty remark about queers." She didn't know how to stand up for her son, even though she already felt awful for all the ways she had failed him: "I only wish we had been more sympathetic when he was young. He was effeminate in many ways and we scolded him for it many times." She concluded by thanking the Manfords "for saying the things that weak, timid people like me can't say and can't even sign their names."

Jeanne herself had always identified as timid; all her life, she insisted that she was "very shy." And yet, as word spread about Parents of Gays and the Manfords started to get invitations to appear on television and radio, she almost always said yes. That was not because she craved the attention—"There was nothing pretentious about her, nothing fortune-seeking, no love of the spotlight," her granddaughter Avril told me—but because she was one of the few people willing to speak out in public on behalf of their gay kids.

By this time, Jules was one of those people, too. In a kind of proof positive for the group's model, which gave parents a chance to talk not only to one another but also to queer people other than their own children, it was Morty's friends who had helped bring Jules fully into the fold. All around the country, kids were getting thrown out of their houses when they came out; meanwhile, Jeanne and Jules were welcoming Morty *and* his friends, and the Manford household had become something of a home for wayward gays. ("You know, 'Who's that sleeping under the coffee table?'" Daniel Dromm, a friend of Jeanne's and a future New York City Council member, joked.) Jules loved talking with these young men, and they convinced him that nothing he had done as a parent had made Morty gay. His activism from that point on was limited only by his deteriorating health—he'd suffered additional heart attacks, as well as a series of strokes—and whenever he could he joined Jeanne in television and radio interviews across the U.S.

One day, a man named Bob Benov happened to catch one of those interviews on the radio. His sixteen-year-old son had just come out, and his wife, Elaine, could hardly imagine anything worse, so Bob told her about Parents of Gays and suggested that they attend a meeting. Soon enough, they became regulars and, along with Richard and Amy Ashworth, started a chapter in Westchester. ("I wasn't sure Westchester was ready for it," Amy Ashworth said. "But then I thought, Nobody's ever ready for it.") Another early member, Sarah Montgomery, was a generation older than Jeanne—she had been born in the nineteenth century—but had likewise never faltered in her love for her gay son. She was devastated when he and his partner, confronting the possibility of losing their jobs because of their sexual orientation, took their own lives together. At meetings, Montgomery told parents, "Your child faces a very hostile world. He needs you more than any of your other children need you."

In California, a couple named Adele and Larry Starr came home one day to a note from their son Philip that said, "I've left home because I am a homosexual." After a frantic search that included placing a personal ad in the Los Angeles *Times*—"Philip, we love you. Call or come home"—they were reunited. They suggested that he see a therapist, but when he told them he wasn't going to change they realized they would have to do so instead. They reached out to Jeanne and Jules, who came to visit and encouraged them to found a Parents of Gays group in L.A. Before long, people began to inquire about starting groups in other places as well: in Binghamton, New York, and Greensboro, North Carolina; in Youngstown, Ohio, and Omaha, Nebraska, and Pensacola, Florida. "I am 70 and hooked onto an oxygen tank most of the time," a mother who was hoping to start a group in Calgary wrote, "but I still have much energy and can use a telephone."

All political activism is a numbers game. Do you have enough supporters to pack a room, convince a legislator, sway a corporation, win an election? By definition, minority groups do not; to secure political victories, they must get others to join their cause. That's the practical reason—though there are compelling philosophical and interpersonal ones as well—why too profound a suspicion of political allies is counterproductive. L.G.B.T.Q. people make up just a fraction of the over-all population, but they have parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. From the beginning, one of the goals of Parents of Gays was to persuade more and more of those people not just to make peace with their queer family members but to make common cause with them.

It worked. Many early members became evangelists for the organization, inspiring similar groups around the country, and in 1979, during the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, representatives from twenty-five of those groups met to talk about forming a national body. They were planning to call it Parents of Lesbians and Gays until one participant raised an objection: if she attended a group by that name, she would effectively out her closeted daughter. As a solution, she suggested adding the word "Friends."

Thus was PFLAG National born. When its First International Convention was held, in August of 1982, participants showed up from England and Holland and Canada and from throughout the United States: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Augusta, Maine; Memphis, Tennessee, and Little Rock, Arkansas; Rapid City, South Dakota, and Birmingham, Alabama, and Corpus Christi, Texas. It was a triumphant occasion for the nascent organization, but a bittersweet one for Jeanne. The conference was dedicated to her husband, Jules, who had died a month before it began, at the age of sixty-three.

Jeanne attended the convention anyway; she knew that he would have wanted her to do so. The program was packed with events, some of them celebratory—banquets, musical performances, awards—but most of them practical. There were workshops on managing a hotline, on working with the media, on legislation relevant to the L.G.B.T.Q. community, on what to do if someone in your family got arrested, on estate planning for gay and lesbian couples. The gestalt impression, borne out by the decade to come, was of a community simultaneously coming into its own and bracing for the worst.

By then, ten years had passed since Jeanne and Morty Manford had marched together up Sixth Avenue. The family home in Flushing was far emptier than it had been back then: Jules was dead; Charles was dead; Suzanne and Avril had moved to California; Morty and his friends were now grownups with homes of their own. And, in a sense, the streets outside were newly empty, too. The end of the Vietnam War had brought with it the end of antiwar activism, and the revolutionary energy of the left had begun to dissipate. The seventies had given way to the eighties, hippies to yuppies, radical action and the collective good to conservatism and greed. Within the queer community, respectability politics were ascendant, protests and disruption on the wane.

Morty, observing these changes and ready for change himself, finally returned to his studies. In 1979, he completed the B.A. that he had begun in 1968, then went on to law school. But his interest in social justice never flagged; he spent four years as a public defender for Legal Aid, then became an assistant attorney general in New York. He seemed to be back on the trajectory that people had envisioned in his youth—on the inside now, a rising star, plausibly bound for elected office. And then, once again, tragedy found the Manford family.

In the spring and summer of 1981, gay men started showing up in intensive-care units in New York and San Francisco with a strange form of pneumonia and a rare type of cancer known as Kaposi's sarcoma. By the end of the year, many of those men were already dead, the earliest American victims of a disease that would eventually be named acquired-immunodeficiency syndrome. By 1985, more than twelve thousand people in the U.S. had died of AIDS, and the country was careering toward full-blown panic. A decade later, that figure had climbed above three hundred thousand, and AIDS was the leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four. More than half the dead were gay men; in that age bracket, one in ten of them died of AIDS, a literal decimation.

The timing of the epidemic was devastating. On the strength of a handful of hard-won legal and cultural victories, the gay community had just barely begun to believe that the future would be better; instead, it got suddenly, existentially worse. Before the development of effective antiretrovirals, AIDS was almost always fatal, and in urban areas with high concentrations of gay men the scale of death was overwhelming. "We watched all of our friends die," the Reverend Troy Perry, the founder of the Metropolitan Community Church and a good friend of Morty's, told me. Men in their thirties were going to funerals every two weeks.

To make matters worse—although they could hardly get worse—the epidemic unleashed another wave of anti-gay vitriol. It was the era of Phyllis Schlafly, the era of Jerry Falwell; there was no shortage of people willing to characterize AIDS as God's retribution for the sin of being gay. Those who were not calling it a purifying agent for a sick society were too often simply ignoring it; Ronald Reagan famously refused to even say "AIDS" for his entire first term. Far too many people who had lived with unnecessary shame now died with it as well, and far too many families buried children they had not yet learned how to love. "I've been to AIDS funerals where they got up and condemned the body that was in the coffin," Perry said.

For many parents, though, AIDS taught them a crucial lesson in the hardest possible way: the time to love your gay children, like all your children, is immediately and always. That had been the message of PFLAG from the beginning, but the organization could not protect its members from the catastrophe of AIDS. All it could do was try to keep them from losing more time than necessary with their children.

Morty Manford learned that he was H.I.V.-positive in the winter of 1989. For a brief period, the family home in Flushing filled back up again. Morty was once more living with his mother; his niece Avril, now twenty-two, moved home as well, to help take care of him. Three generations of Manfords did what they could for Morty, but that was barely more than what they had always done: love him. He died on May 14, 1992, at the age of forty-one.

Five months later, Jeanne stood in the pouring rain in the nation's capital with a quarter of a million other people while the names of those who had died of AIDS were read aloud on the steps of the Washington Monument. Earlier that day, the AIDS Quilt—that beautiful homespun expression of grief and anger, each panel roughly the size of a grave—had been unfurled on the National Mall. One of its panels read "Golden Boy. Freedom Fighter. His star lights our way." When Jeanne dedicated it, she said that her son had "stood against the seemingly invincible forces of hate, greed, and bigotry and helped to turn them back."

THE PRINCESS AND THE PEOPLE UPSTAIRS

WAAAAA
BANG!
BOOM
STOMP
STOMP
STOMP
seitchik

For the second time, Jeanne had buried one of her children. And, also for the second time, she responded by tending as best as she could to her remaining family. Moved by the experience of caring for Morty, Avril had applied to medical school and been accepted at the Mayo Clinic. She was married by then and newly pregnant, so Jeanne, well into her seventies, uprooted herself after a lifetime in Flushing and relocated to Minnesota to help take care of the baby. Two years later, she moved again, this time to live with Suzanne in Daly City, California. Jeanne Manford died there on January 8, 2013, at the age of ninety-two. The next month, Barack Obama posthumously awarded her the Presidential Citizens Medal for her work on behalf of L.G.B.T.Q. people and their families. In his remarks, he summarized, in the plainest possible terms, the reason she stood up against bigotry on behalf of her son: "She loved him and wouldn't put up with this kind of nonsense."

What made this worthy of a President's praise was that, when Jeanne first began speaking out, almost everyone around her took that nonsense as gospel. It is difficult to say why some people perceive injustice right away while others require a social movement or a civil war to see it, if they ever do. Some of those who knew Jeanne Manford speculated that her support for Morty stemmed from Charles's suicide—that, having lost one child, she could not bear the thought of losing another. Others suggested that it was because she grew up Jewish at a time of rampant antisemitism, deadly abroad and insidious at home. But Suzanne, who disputes both accounts, told me that her mother simply loved her children as many parents strive to but few achieve: unconditionally.

The organization that Jeanne Manford helped found on the strength of that love lives on, in many respects unchanged. At its regular grassroots gatherings, there are family members in various stages of embracing their kids, L.G.B.T.Q. people on hand to listen and help, boxes of tissues that still get used at almost every meeting. All that differs, in some places, are the demographics. In New York City, where PFLAG started, the organization now hosts A.P.I. Rainbow Parents, which specifically supports Asian and Pacific Islander L.G.B.T.Q. people and their families; elsewhere, groups are full of Spanish speakers or members of the military. And all over the country more and more parents of trans kids are showing up at meetings.

A decade ago, one of those parents was Susan Thronson, who is now the president of the board of directors of PFLAG National. A support group "changed my life, and by extension my family's life," she told me, before describing a familiar trajectory: the meetings helped her become a more supportive parent, then an outspoken activist. PFLAG was one of the first national organizations in America to add transgender rights to its mission, back in 1998; under Thronson's leadership, the group recently sued Governor Greg Abbott, of Texas, over his directive requiring child-abuse investigations into reported cases of minors receiving gender-affirming care.

On the phone with me, Thronson mused about what the Manfords would make of PFLAG's work today. "No one twenty-five years ago would have anticipated gender expression and gender identity would have been the issue," she said, and she herself can't imagine what the issue will be twenty-five years hence. She does believe, though, that the organization will remain necessary, and that its core commitment will continue to be its best guide: "We love all of our children, and we're not going to leave any of them behind."

In case she ever needs a reminder of the courage that commitment takes, she keeps a photograph of Jeanne Manford on her desk. It is the iconic one, of Manford marching up Sixth Avenue with her son and her sign. Just behind her is an elderly man, tall and stooped, in a white shirt and dark tie. With the clarity of retrospect, it is possible to see not only the physical proximity of the two figures but their metaphorical common ground. Like Dr. Spock, the Manfords, as Thronson put it, "are responsible for changing the way Americans raise their children." ♦

EVENSONG

LAURIE COLWIN

ILLUSTRATION BY XIAO HUA YANG

This is not an account of a love affair, and it is not the story of a religious conversion, although elements of both pertain. Of course, in life, which is full of surprises, it is hard to know what anything is.

My husband, John Felix, and I live, with our ten-year-old daughter, Alice, on the bottom two floors of a brownstone, in the neighborhood of an Anglican seminary, a collection of Gothic buildings and a lawn. In the spring, it is possible to watch priests and their families playing croquet on the grass. In summer, vaporous smoke from their tiny barbecues wafts through our front windows. If you were a complete psycho and could not tell one thing from another, the orderly workings of this place—its piper on St. Andrew's Day, its Christmas procession and Easter picnic—would remind you that the season had changed, and you would know, because the hours are marked by bell ringing, what time it was at least five times a day. Even those who pay absolutely no attention to the institution are affected by it, if for no other reason than because on clear nights you can hear the organist practicing in the chapel.

Our lives—the lives of the Felix family—are also informed by Louis and Emily Billiards, whom we have known for years. Louis is a dealer in fine antique English and French furniture. His shop is in our neighborhood, and it was he who found the wonderful place in which we now live. Before we lived here, we lived right next door to the Billiards family, and we are very connected. Emily, who is the head of production at a publishing company, helped me get my first job as a book designer. When I became pregnant with Alice, Emily sent me to her doctor, and when Alice was a baby, Emily and Louis's daughter, Janet, babysat for us. Meanwhile, their son, Peter, graduated from college and needed advice about banking, which my husband, John, who works on Wall Street, was happy to give. When I quit my job, Emily helped me find freelance work. Louis also sold us our walnut dining-room table and fruitwood sideboard at a good price. How much we owe to Emily and Louis! Sometimes when I cannot sleep at night I am tortured, as if by bedbugs or red ants, at the size of this debt.

This account of what we owe the Billiards family is one of many lists. I am by nature a person whose constant battle against encroaching chaos is fought by list-making and organizational thinking. I make grocery lists that cover our immediate needs, our staple needs, our long-term needs, and our long-term needs of a special nature, such as a dinner party a month away. I *know* what I will serve at a dinner party a month away. Of course, in order to make these lists, plans must be made. My family tells me that I can sometimes be seen baring my teeth or muttering to myself as I make these lists.

For a while, my list-making was complicated by the fact that I had stumbled into a love affair with Louis Billiards (some way to pay Emily back for all her kindness!). Louis likes ginger ale, for example. No one in the Felix family will touch it. The same goes for gherkins, which Louis adores, and liverwurst. The trick was to coördinate the bringing of these items into our fridge with Louis coming for lunch.

I spent many hours of each day thinking as follows: If Louis turns up for lunch and eats the boiled potatoes, we will have to have rice with parsley and butter with dinner, but if he does not eat the potatoes we can have potato salad, which goes so much better with roast chicken. If Louis does not drink the ginger ale, or eat the Niçoise olives, or if he finishes the broccoli soup—and so on.

On the other hand, John and I are sort of hopeless around the house and are constantly paying workmen to come and do simple things like change the screens in the spring or fix the filter on the air-conditioner in the summer. It was Louis who eventually did these things. He made the list. He put Mortite around the back windows in the fall, and he put the screens up in the spring, and one day, when John was away on business and Alice was on one of her overnight class trips, Louis took down the pantry door and planed it. When he rehung it, it opened and closed perfectly. Emily, who is extremely competent, often beats Louis to the punch when it comes to household work—doubtless the reason he was having an affair with me.

In a love affair, it is usually the lover who is handsome and the husband who is not, whereas it was just the reverse in my case. John is exceptionally good-looking—tall, wavy-haired, lean, and fine-featured. Louis is a little shorter than I am, and bald, with a fringe of white hair. He has been weather-beaten to the color of teak and smells of cigars and furniture polish. Unlike my husband, who looks ravishing in his banker's suits, Louis plods around in worn chino trousers, blue work shirts, an old corduroy jacket, and suède desert boots. During the many hours I spent pondering my activities with Louis, it occurred to me that elements of the father-daughter relationship must obtain in an affair in which the man is old enough (or almost old enough) to be the woman's father. Of course, it also occurred to me that Louis was nothing whatsoever like my father, who was not bald, did not smoke cigars, was pale, and preferred to be rather formally dressed. But of course it does not matter if the person is like one's father. It matters that the person be *fatherly*. As I watched Louis weather-strip our back windows, I could not help but feel that he was something of a father to both me and John, although I knew that couldn't be right.

It is said that there are always four people in a love affair of this sort, the lovers and their spouses. It is also said that when two people go to bed together their parents are right there with them. Moreover, there is a saying that it often takes three to make a marriage. What a mob! And all because Louis and I were having a love affair.

Louis is a descendant of someone named Francis-Hugo Billiards, one of the founders of the neighborhood seminary. It was either coincidence, or fate, or divine guidance that led Louis to have a shop almost directly across the street from this institution. This forebear is the author of the hymn "In His Pasture May I Graze (That His Love May E'er Secure Me)," No. 214 in the hymnal supplement. One is encouraged to sing it "with flowing rhythm."

All these connections prove that

everything, somehow or other, is in order. Life is infinitely rich, and infinitely interconnected. In the twilight of an early-fall or spring evening, I like to sit on the front steps with my daughter and watch our neighbors. Our street pulsates with individuality: rare breeds of dogs, strange modes of dress. No one even walks like anyone else. It occurs to me as I sit that everyone in the world is born with a personality and is fully entitled to express it. The planet is a-spin with notions, phobias, inclinations, tastes, ideas, creeds, beliefs, and behaviors of all kinds. Often this thought is uplifting and fills my heart with what feels like rich blood. If I stopped any of these people and questioned them closely, we would be sure to have a friend, an experience, a relative in common.

There is just no getting away from the complexity of human life. We are a tide pool, teeming with varieties of species. No matter which way you turn—on the bus, in the supermarket, sitting in a coffee shop—you are surrounded by people making idiosyncratic choices about this and that. Sometimes this all gives me a headache, and I reflect on what a pain in the neck people are.

My love affair with Louis began when he started to renovate his shop. He acquired a second shop next door and broke through a wall to connect them. Since I live in the neighborhood, and since I felt I owed the Billiardses so profound a debt, I volunteered to open the shop early in the morning for the workmen. It was the least that I could do. Had they not found us our dwelling? Our doctors? Did we not use products recommended by them? Their daughter as a babysitter? Had they not helped us get a good price on our beautiful Persian rug?

The renovations began early in September. One day in late October, I stopped by to see what progress had been made and to have a cup of tea with Louis. It was Alice's afternoon to have her ballet class, after which she always had dinner at her little friend Annie Shepherd's. After their afternoon of field sports, Annie Shepherd often came to us for dinner. How beautifully ordered are the lives of children!

The workmen had gone home. The street was empty. A thought flew into my head and I expressed it. I said, "I think I come to visit you too much." After all, I honestly had no interest in Louis's renovations, and yet I felt drawn to his shop.

Then Louis said, in a tone I had never heard from him before, "I don't think you visit often enough."

I was covered with shame to find that my heart had begun to pound in my chest. Louis got out of his chair and locked the door. He hung up a sign that said "CLOSED." I followed him into the musty basement where he stored new shipments and furniture that needed repair or reupholstering. There, under a clean packing quilt, on a wide chaise that was to be reupholstered in pale-blue linen, we committed adultery. Nowadays, it gives me a pang to walk into a neighbor's house and see some piece of furniture that Louis and I once misbehaved on.

As to the cause of this love affair, well, cause was not my thing, really. Feeling was more up my street, as they say. This alliance had a preordained, familial feeling to it that I found irresistible—the combination of innocence and intimate knowledge you get at a family reunion.

One winter afternoon, when Louis and I had emerged from a tattered empire sofa in the basement, the seminary bells began to ring, reminding us that it was five o'clock.

"You know," I said conversationally, "We've lived here for almost ten years and I still don't know what those bells signify."

With this, Louis dragged me to my feet, wrapped me in my coat, switched off the lights, locked up his store, and led me out into the street. He walked me right through the seminary gates and toward the chapel.

"From couch to church!" he said jauntily.

I stopped on the path and would not move. Louis seemed right at home on the seminary grounds—being, after all, the descendant of a founder—but I was not. Furthermore, it was clear he was going to take me into the chapel, and I did not think it right to enter a religious structure after having been to bed with a man who was not my husband.

"Furthermore, I am not a Christian," I said.

"Pish-tush," Louis said. "You're a poor excuse for a Jew, and so is that husband of yours."

This was certainly true. John and I were the most watered-down of Jews, raised by diluted Jews who did not know how to be Jewish at all. As a result, John was sent to a Quaker school, I was sent to a school that embraced all faiths, and the two of us had put in some time at the Sunday schools of reformed congregations where, for the most part, we passed notes, chewed gum, and saw our little friends from dance class. Out of a sincere but confused longing to establish in our child some sense of cultural identification, we sent her to a Sunday school from which she appeared spouting the names of holidays we had not known existed, and patiently instructing us in various religious matters as best she could. Each year, we had a secular Christmas, and more advanced Jewish friends invited us to Passover dinners.

"I won't know where to put my feet," I said, balking at the chapel door.

"We'll sit in the back and no one will know what an infidel you are."

"Infidel does not cover what I am," I said.

"Now, now," Louis said. "No melodrama. God loves us in our sins. Be a good girl. Take a deep breath and move." He gave me a little shove and I flew up the stairs and into the chapel.

The last light came through the stained-glass windows, but the rest of the chapel was dim. The altar was lit with candles. I was immediately overcome with that undeniable, elevating melancholy so many people feel in a religious setting.

I found myself sitting in a pew, staring in panic at the row of books in front of me: the hymnal, the supplement to the hymnal, a book of canticles, the Book of Common Prayer, and a paperbound book with the seminary's name stamped on it, which when opened revealed itself to be full of hand-transcribed music.

"What am I supposed to do?" I said.

"Just look at the nice pictures in the windows and then stand when I stand and kneel when I kneel."

"Kneel?" I said. "Do I have to kneel?

BREAK

The arm I shattered on a bike,
meticulously reassembled by surgeons,
is now healing up in pain, and so it will be
for long weeks to come. Over the eastern border
of my country there's a war on, the able skeletons
of men are grabbing weapons and going to get death
or life, in their skulls yin and yang merge
into one, as if they were parts of a spinning
bullet before it hits the target. Meanwhile my arm,
broken in three places, is slowly starting to
heal, which means I'll miss out this summer
on bathing in the lake, Sunday trips to the beach,
catching fish, and even the sweet burden of my one-
year-old daughter, who looks at the plaster and twists
her lips into a horseshoe. Meanwhile on the front lines
healthy skeletons are fighting in a righteous cause,
crushing skeletons fighting in an evil cause,
and I know that for three more months I won't be
able to wash myself properly. When I've healed up, I'll be
part of the world's skeleton again, but this
time, if I get shattered, then only for a worthy
aim, my mended arm will grab a weapon and set off
shoulder to shoulder with the freedom fighters, my index
finger will learn to pull the trigger of my rifle
tenderly—such thoughts went shooting through my head
as I lay in the recovery room.

But a few months on, when my plaster was removed,
with trembling hand I showed my little daughter
a plump sparrow perched on too thin a branch.

—Tadeusz Dąbrowski

(Translated, from the Polish, by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.)

I feel it would be a betrayal of my Jewishness to kneel."

Louis gave me an indulgent look. "What future for the Jews?" he said. "You can stand. It's the alternative method."

I sat in my place and watched the community file in. Many of these people were familiar to me—recent or longtime neighbors whom I saw at least once a day. And yet they had been going about this particular piece of business right under my nose. How secret are even the open lives of others!

I saw the nice red-haired man I always said hello to at the newsstand, although I had never seen him in a clerical collar before. He was standing with his wife, whom I always saw in the supermarket. At the last minute, a tall Black man in flowing African garb walked in. This man lived on our street with his wife and two daughters. His wife, too, wore African clothes, with a winter coat on top when it was cold. In this costume she looked terribly homesick, and seeing them on the street as a family made me homesick, too. You would not find this woman having an unexplained love affair with an old friend.

The organist began to play. Louis elbowed me in the side to get me to stand. As I stood, I could see a procession emerge from the back of the chapel—a line of people, mostly men, in academic robes.

"Who are they?" I whispered, as they took their places.

"The deans and teachers," Louis said into my ear. "Now hush. It's beginning."

A disembodied male voice floated from the back of the chapel and began to chant:

> O God, make speed to save us.

The congregation, Louis included, chanted back:

> O Lord, make haste to help us.

Tears came into my eyes. I wanted to throw my coat over my head and sob. The chant continued, but I was too concerned with not disgracing Louis by crying.

The organ then played a note, and a pure, high woman's voice began to sing:

> O gracious Light,
> pure brightness of the everliving Father in
> heaven.

Louis had opened all the right books to all the right places, but the print swam in front of me. During the singing of the Psalms, a line hovered up before me: "Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts." And during the singing of the Magnificat I was brought up short by the line "He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts."

I stood there mute and awash in emotions of many sorts, among them shock that Louis knew this service like the back of his hand and seemed on very chummy terms with his Creator.

We heard readings from the Old and New Testaments. We chanted prayers both standing and kneeling. Then the organ sounded and a hymn was sung. To my surprise, the tune was familiar, the chorale from a Bach cantata.

Finally, we received a benediction and filed out into the autumn night. The air was crisp and filled with woodsmoke.

"John is in Chicago, isn't he?" Louis asked.

"Until tomorrow." I felt I was having trouble speaking.

"And Alice?"

"She's at Annie Shepherd's for supper."

"Well, then," Louis said. "Feed me. Emily's at an A.G.A. meeting." The A.G.A., of which Emily was chairwoman, was the Association of Graphic Artists, to which I in fact belonged—at Emily's suggestion—although I

"O.K., you two. Clean up the house and do the laundry while I take the kids to school!"

• •

never went to meetings. I did not want to have a meal alone. In the darkness, the seminarians looked like furtive animals scurrying for home. The windows on the other side of the street were full of warm, yellow light. All this made me feel the kind of awful loneliness you feel in childhood at twilight.

In the fridge I had leftover stew, eggplant-and-pepper conserve, and rice salad. I wished Louis had not been my lover, so that I could have the luxury of sharing leftovers in a guilt-free atmosphere with an old friend.

We had our meal, during which Alice called to ask if I would pick her up or if I wanted the Shepherds to walk her home. I said I would pick her up.

"If only she knew what her mother was," I said to Louis.

"What is her mother?" Louis said blandly. "Oh, I see. A woman taken in adultery. Now, now. You're a nice girl, and you're not much different from anyone else."

"Do you think those seminarians go around having sexual encounters in the afternoon with old friends?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Louis said. "That place is a hotbed of all sorts of emotional misbehavior."

Louis's perspective on life was very consoling to me. He was old enough to take the long view. Life unrolled before him like a Persian runner. He observed and enjoyed, without filling his head with a million unnecessary questions.

"How does anyone keep all those books straight?" I said.

"Practice," Louis said.

"How come you know that service so well?"

"I went there," Louis said.

"You what?"

"When I was a little boy," he said. "I mean a little boy in my twenties. I thought I might become a clergyman, but I decided not to."

I was stunned by this piece of news.

"Why did you decide not to?" I asked.

"Oh, Papa was getting on, and he thought it would be nice to leave such a flourishing trade to me. I love furniture, and I liked having an excuse to go to England and France three times a year. It's a nice, civilized business. The life of most clergymen is a nasty one. They are either constantly saying what they don't mean or searching to find out what they do mean, and they don't make any money and they lose their faith. Besides, I'm too much of a sybarite."

"Nobody knows anything about anybody," I said sadly.

"Nonsense," Louis said. "People know plenty. Do you really want to know every little thing? Don't you ever want anyone to surprise you?"

Actually, I did not. I wanted to know everything all at once. In fact, I was often brought to tears by the thought that my darling Alice, my own flesh and blood, had dreams, and a school life, and thoughts to which I had no access whatsoever.

"For instance," Louis said. "I didn't know you knew any hymns."

"I didn't, either," I said.

"Well, hymns are like that," Louis said. "Catchy."

It was time to pick up Alice. Louis walked me into the night, up the street, and to the Shepherds' corner. I thanked him for taking me to Evensong.

"All that standing and kneeling," he said. "Just like exercise."

From that time on, my life assumed a slightly different pattern. I had tea, or what we euphemistically called tea, with Louis a few times a week, and on the days that Alice stayed late at school for French conversation, or sports, or went to ballet or to her piano lesson, I found myself in chapel for Evensong. Perhaps I was merely killing time. After all, I did my work in the morning; my child did not come home some days till after five; my husband did not come home until seven; and Louis was not always available. Besides, I was fond of music and liked to sing. Evensong gave me plenty of both.

One afternoon in Louis's basement, I said, "Isn't it funny, Louis? Here we are together, and your Janet used to babysit for our Alice."

"An arrangement that could easily be revived if we ran off together," he said, leaning over me to get a cigarillo out of his jacket pocket. A chill passed over my heart. The tip of the iceberg is a most terrifying sight. I looked at Louis, who was smoking contentedly, and said, "Do you really think we should run off together?"

"Certainly not, you silly girl," he said. "I was attempting to make an entertaining remark."

Who knows why this entertaining remark set off such a depth charge in me. Perhaps I harbored a longing to run off with Louis. After all, if the other is unknowable, then the self is unknowable as well. It is almost better to go through life with eyes half closed than to have unpredictable parts spring up out of oneself like mushrooms after a rain.

Walking home from the shop, I came across the African family strolling down the street. The father, splendid in his batiks, with a brown overcoat; the mother, wearing a short coat with a fur collar over her tribal dress; and the two little girls, in braids and school uniforms. You won't find any love dalliances going on in that mob, I thought.

At the start of spring, Louis went abroad on one of his buying trips, and when he came back it was clear that he had made a decision about me: our love dalliance was over. He did not lead me down to his basement to entwine illicitly in packing quilts. Instead, we sat upstairs and had tea, which Louis brewed on his hot plate. I did not question the wisdom of this decision, doubtless because I was relieved not to have had to make it myself, and because emotional scenes were spared. Also, I deferred to Louis's fatherly guidance.

But when I was alone I was often assailed by fear. Perhaps I had done or said something Louis found disgusting. Perhaps he found *me* disgusting. Perhaps he was ill, or Emily had discovered our affair, or he had told her everything. In a more paranoid moment, I imagined that Louis had had an affair with me solely to get me into chapel and thereby convert me.

One afternoon, I blurted, "Why did you drop me, Louis?"

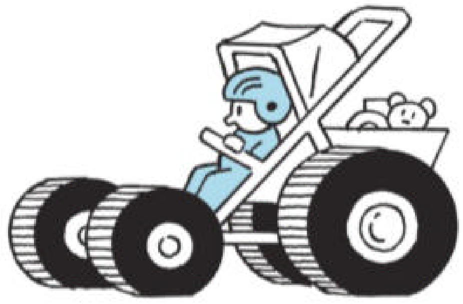
"I didn't drop you," Louis said. "We're having tea, aren't we?"

"I mean, why don't we ever sleep together anymore?" I said.

"It was never the right thing to do," Louis said. His eyes were mild and kind, and it was quite impossible to see behind them. He was not going to say another word on the subject, and I was going to be left to contemplate this welter of possibilities forever.

And so I saw Louis for tea once a week. I picked Alice up at school. I attended Evensong. The service became an addiction. Was it the fact that only the music changed, that certain prayers followed certain canticles which followed certain readings? Or was it the music and the setting, which were so curiously soothing and emotional? I puttered around the house singing "O Blest Creator of the Light." At times, I said to myself aloud, "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord," which, according to the Book of Common Prayer, is part of a collect for aid against perils.

As the light changed, the stained-glass windows revealed themselves. As the buds came out, little leaves made a speckled pattern on Adam, Eve, and the serpent. It occurred to me that it would be hard to explain what a Jewish girl, even a very watered-down one, was doing at five o'clock in the afternoon in a chapel singing "O Trinity of Blessed Light." It did not seem to be the religious angle that I was after. I had quite enough trouble with the concept of one God. Three-in-one was much too confusing to contemplate.



Then one day I had an actual revelation. It came to me that I might never know very much about anything. It might never be imparted to me *what* I was doing at Evensong. "The thing about the unknowable," I said to myself, "is that you have to accept that it just isn't knowable, and that's that." I found this very relaxing.

On a beautiful evening late in April, I came out of Evensong and bumped right into my husband, my very own John. I was amazed to see him, and he looked back at me with pain and puzzlement on his face.

"Oh, hello!" I said brightly, as to a new neighbor. "How did you know where I was?"

"Last night, when I came home early, I saw you come out," he said. "I got home early tonight, and I thought I'd come and pick you up and find out what's going on."

"Nothing's going on," I said.

"You're not converting, are you?" he asked. He looked terribly worried.

"Of course not, silly," I said. "It's nice in there. I like to sing. It reminds me of my Jewish heritage. I've been thinking that we ought to take more part in Alice's religious upbringing and go to Friday-night services every once in a while. I also think we should have a proper Passover next year."

"That's a wonderful idea," John said. He was very relieved. God knows what he had thought. I was not going to know; I was not even going to know what *I* thought.

I took John's arm, and we walked slowly down the street toward Alice's school. It was a sports afternoon. The school was a nice, brisk walk away. It was a treat for her to be picked up by her father. It was a treat to have him home early on such a lovely spring night. We walked with our arms around each other. When we got to the school, we would find Alice in her sports clothes, with her school uniform in a canvas carryall. Her answer those days to the question "What did you do today?" was "Nothing very interesting."

Then we would walk home, the three of us, through the front door and into our privacy, as close and as distant as any connected people are. ♦

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Laurie Colwin's child on finding "Evensong."

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

ZONKED

The exhausting history of fatigue.

BY ANTHONY LANE

In 1698, the Duc de Berry had a nosebleed. This calamity was brought on by his "overheating" during a partridge hunt. Three hundred and nineteen years later, the writer Anaïs Vanel quit her editing job and went surfing. What links this unlikely couple? Well, both of them earn a mention in "A History of Fatigue" (Polity), a new book by Georges Vigarello, translated by Nancy Erber. The book sets out to examine, in frankly draining detail, the many ways in which humans, often against their will, end up thoroughly pooped.

Vigarello is not, as his name suggests, an irrepressible sidekick in a minor Mozart opera, egging his master on to commit extravagant japes, but a research director at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, in Paris. He has previously written books about, among other things, cleanliness, obesity, and sports. Now it is the turn of the tired—the French tailors, for instance, who worked "fourteen to eighteen hours in the most painful positions," as one of their number reported in 1833. Or the combatant in the First World War who found himself "on the brink of the void, feeling nothing but monotony and lassitude." Or, at a slightly lower pitch of extremity, the supermarket cashier who, in 2002, was struck by "terrible pain" after lifting a pack of bottled water. Will the agony never cease?

As a theme, fatigue is so extensive, and so intrinsic to the fact of being alive, that demarcating where it begins or ends is no simple task. One can imagine a Borgesian fable in which a fatiguologist, bent upon covering every aspect of the topic, dies of sheer inanition with the project incomplete. The more encyclopedic the mission, the stricter the boundaries that need to be set; if you're expecting "A History of Fatigue" to begin with the Iliad—whose protagonists are pre-wiped, having battled for nine years before the action of the poem gets under way—you are doomed to disappointment. Nothing about the ancient world, it would seem, appeals to Vigarello. He doubtless believes that everyone back then was brimming with juice and zip, and that if Achilles harried Hector three times around the walls of Troy it's because both guys needed the exercise.

Defiantly, then, and without ado, Vigarello starts his clock in the Middle Ages. One of his earliest witnesses is Constantine the African, an eleventh-century physician, who issues an ominous caution: "You must avoid and reject heavy burdens and cares because excessive worrying dries out our bodies, leaches out our vital energies, fostering despair in our minds and sucking out the substance from our bones." (Sounds to me like last Thursday.) Nine centuries and three hundred pages later, Vigarello finally reaches the tribulations of the now, including the shatteringly thankless experience of life online. In a despondent afterword, he casts his gaze upon COVID-19, though not, oddly enough, upon the specific drudgery of long COVID. What that bequeaths, as I could have assured him, is the very dreariest of double whammies—feeling tired of feeling tired.

As with chronology, so with geography: Vigarello, having the entire globe at his disposal to comb for traces of tiredness, opts to be as French as possible. There are cursory nods to other countries, most of them in the Northern Hemisphere, and Theodore Roosevelt gets a shout-out for his 1899 collection of essays and speeches, tellingly titled "The Strenuous Life," but, for the most part, Vigarello plants his heels in home turf. To be fair, some of his compatriots are a treat. Say hello to the bilious M. Petit, aged fifty, "overwhelmed with business stresses and worries," whose heart was "irritated by strenuous exercise, by heat, by bathing and sexual intercourse, by intoxication, by drinking strong wine and by quarrelling." He could be the deserving victim in a Maigret mystery of the nineteen-fifties. In fact, his troubles date from 1646.

Sometimes the Frenchness kicks in as a curlicue—a tiny twist to an otherwise solemn recitation of scholarly facts. Here is a prime example:

> Jacques Fessard and Christian David investigated an accident where a driver skidded and was seriously injured after a 600-kilometer journey. The researchers took a cautious approach: Was it the length of the drive? The lack of rest breaks? The need to meet a deadline? Was it the result of anxiety about the driver's promise to meet, with very little time to spare, both his wife and his mistress?

What we really need at this juncture is a graph, with the dual amours helpfully plotted along the x- and y-axes. Or a Venn diagram, with adultery lurking and smirking in the shaded area. In the event, Vigarello's book is bereft of diagrams—a genuine surprise, given how insistently he is drawn toward the calibrated and the categorized. ("Using the diagnostic tools of

ABOVE: LIANA JEGERS

With the rise of the word "languor," in the eighteenth century, ennui began to peel away from fatigue.

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

the time, they measured strength with a dynamometer, fatigue with an ergograph, and lung power with a spirometer." Be still, my beating pulse!) His methodology places him squarely in the most distinctive of Gallic traditions, as a long-range beneficiary of the Enlightenment; hence the jolt of fellow-feeling with which he seizes on his forebears, such as the nobleman who rides from Fontainebleau to Paris, in 1754, with "a watch sewn onto his left sleeve so that he can always know the time." The driving principle of "A History of Fatigue," indeed, is that the human race is a *race*, with every generation of innovators striving to outrun the discoveries of the previous one, and the march of progress quickening into a sprint. To be honest, the whole thing is exhausting.

So, what's the plot? What has fatigue been up to? Well, initially, it was all about the leaching. In the medieval map of the body, Vigarello tells us, we were filled with fluids, and the trick was to prevent them from dripping or flowing away. Withering and stiffness were signs of superfluous exertion, and perspiration was "a dangerous symptom," though how you were meant to stanch your sweat while bending over to dig up root vegetables, say, is unclear. If we hear little of the laboring poor, that's because documentation was, by definition, the preserve of the literate, notably the highborn and the priestly. When it comes to clanking knights, loaded down with armor and knocking lumps out of each other with the swing of an axe, the records give Vigarello a ringside seat, and he is pleased to register the tally of blows that were stipulated by Jean Pitois for his bout with Jacques de Lalaing on October 15, 1450: sixty-three. Talk about crunching the numbers.

We are also honored with a useful section on "redemptive fatigue"—the soul-cleansing result of pilgrimages and other acts of penance, undertaken either barefoot or in shoes that were, as Vigarello says, "usually made of one piece of leather." You have to admire the Count of Flanders, Guy of Dampierre, who died in 1305; skillfully covering his bets, he left the huge sum of eight thousand pounds in his will to anyone who would walk to the Holy Land on his behalf. All of the shriving and none of the blisters. Job done.

The strange thing is that Vigarello, having glanced at the subject of spiritual exhaustion, goes briskly onward and doesn't look back, as if the figure of the pilgrim were too antiquated to detain him further. Yet the Christian narrative of depletion and renewal has proved stubbornly enduring. Crowds of the faithful have sat in the pews of churches and listened to this:

> Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

That lofty guarantee, from the Book of Isaiah, is borne forward into a single verse in the Gospel of St. Matthew, and thence into the Book of Common Prayer: "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." Spurn or scorn such promises, if you will, but it's hard to deny them a place in any history of fatigue, just as the history of art has been enriched by recurring images of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, surrounded by his somnolent disciples ("Could you not watch with me one hour?" he asks Peter), or rising from the tomb, unnoticed by the dozing Roman guards. Of all the tumults in the world, they sleep through this one.

Vigarello is unmoved. He *is* concerned with religious instruction, but solely as it pertains to remedies for the flagging. Prospective travellers, in the thirteenth century, were advised by Aldebrandin of Siena "to eat only light meats and drink plain water or water infused with onion, vinegar or sour apples to purify their humors." How comforting to know that our weakness for dietary elixirs, far from being a passing fad, is one of the eternal verities, and that, when Aldebrandin counsels his readers "to keep a crystal in their mouths to calm their thirst," he is not, as you might think, clinging to absurd superstition but courageously paving the way for Gwyneth Paltrow.

Like any chronicler, in other words, Vigarello is alert to the competing claims of common sense and nonsense. "During the Enlightenment, interlocking fibers, filaments, 'currents' and nerves took the place of bodily humors, and they explained the presence of fatigue," he says in his introduction. "New physical sensations were recognized that interacted with a feeling of emptiness, a lack of motivation, and the loss of spirit." The fibres and the filaments may strike no chord with us, but the emptiness is gallingly up to date, as is a guilty suspicion that complaining about it, and seeking tonics to allay it, may be more entwined with privilege than we care to admit. If you're holding down three jobs to feed your offspring, it's unlikely that "lack of motivation" will earn much space in your head.

Some of the most mordant passages in "A History of Fatigue" focus on the advent of "languor" in the vocabulary of the well-to-do, and on the vexation that ensued. "I was feeling weary since I left Fontainebleau," Madame de Maintenon wrote in a letter of 1713. "I was able to rest more there and that affects my health." What's interesting here is the intimation of a rift in meaning; ennui is peeling away from fatigue. You can be tired *of* something—or, more querulous still, sick and tired of it—despite not being tired *by* it, or falling demonstrably sick. A routine of social conduct, even one that might be envied as luxurious, winds up cosseting, jading, and eventually stifling the souls (if not the bodies) of those whom it was devised to entertain. Politically, such a rift can yawn as wide as a gulf; stuck in Versailles, in 1705, Madame de Maintenon confided that she felt "massacred by the life one leads here." Massacred? Only eighty-four years to wait.

With the grind of factory labor, in the nineteenth century, Vigarello hits his most thrustful stride—and, incidentally, compels the reader to question the title of his book. Is it actually a history of fatigue? Does it not become, in truth, a history of work, of which fatigue is but one of the by-products? Vigarello cites a three-volume book on industrial economy, from 1829: "Think through all the steps in the work process" and "You will feel much less fatigued but you will earn much more." The emphasis is now on the human frame as a machine, or a furnace ("Food is for the animal as fuel is for the stove," one German scientist proclaimed, in 1842), which can be regulated to function as efficiently as possible in the manufacturing process. You need not be a trained Marxist to catch the whiff of irony that rises, at this point, from the molten core of capitalist enterprise. Whom to assign to delicate duties, for example, once mechanization, as Vigarello says, has "lessened the need for brute strength"? Why not call up the kids?

> Child labor is necessary in factories; the dexterity of their fingers, the rapidity of their movements and the smallness of their stature make it impossible to replace children with adults in all aspects of factory work without incurring a significant financial loss.

That is a statement read to the Chamber of Deputies, then the lower house of the French Parliament, in 1840. To our ears, it is a near-parody of demonic utilitarianism, and, compounded by Vigarello's revelation that some children were shod in tall metal boots, to stop them from keeling over with the strain, it leaves one profoundly grateful for legislation that has—in many countries, though by no means all—laid such debasement to rest. At the same time, today's reader will be amazed to scour the index and to realize that, in a book that dwells at length on forced employment, there is just one reference to African American slavery. To work for a pittance, in brutish conditions, is dire enough; to do so because you are owned by another being, and cannot voluntarily withdraw your labor, is iniquity of a different order, and, had Vigarello turned to canonical texts, such as those of Frederick Douglass, he would have been confronted with recitations of fatigue that verge on the elemental. Enslaved people, Douglass says, "find less difficulty from the want of beds, than from the want of time to sleep." He adds:

> Very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day; and when this is done, old and young, male and female, married and single, drop down side by side, on one common bed,—the cold, damp floor,—each covering himself or herself with their miserable blankets; and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver's horn.

It is the phrase "drop down" that pierces. For a moment, we could be reading about a battleground, strewn with the wounded and the dead.

Seldom does Vigarello accost you with so startling an image. Not that he stints on torments, as his research drags him into the twentieth century, and to chapters titled "From Hormones to Stress" and "From Burn Out to Identity." We are introduced to Alexei Stakhanov, the Soviet worker who mined more than a hundred tons of coal in a single night shift, in 1935, and who lent his name to an ideal—or a perilous myth—of inexhaustibility. We learn of soldiers, both Allied and German, being given amphetamines to keep them awake and alert during offensives in the Ardennes or North Africa. (Were seventy-two *million* doses of Benzedrine, as Vigarello alleges, really issued to pilots during the Battle of Britain?) The discussion of fatigue as a weapon, deployed in the Gulag and the Nazi labor camps, consumes a mere two pages of this lengthy work. You may regard that as a mercy.

Despite this litany of ordeals, all too corporeal, the course that is set by Vigarello in the latter stages of his book is steadily inward, into what he calls a "detailed inventory of psychic malaise." Reports, filed not from the trenches but from assembly lines and offices, start to speak of fragmentation, helplessness, and an imprisonment that requires no bars. A new fear wells up: a tired mind may be more resistant to healing than the body in which it is housed. Vigarello turns his own, untiring mind to the matter of neurasthenia, a term that crept into common parlance after being used by the neurologist George Miller Beard, in 1869; yet again, though, one can't help wishing that "A History of Fatigue" would linger, and prolong its investigations, in the United States. Where else would a pharmaceutical company advertise an elixir concocted to soothe "the peculiar exhausted nervous conditions resulting from the continuous rush and tension under which Americans live"? The miracle cure was made by Rexall, and the conditions had a name, bestowed with God knows what amalgam of pride and dread: Americanitis.

"Push the calamari!"

So heavily armed is "A History of Fatigue" that only someone with a matching arsenal of data would dare to tackle Vigarello on his own ground. All one can manage is the occasional prod of doubt. If, as the book appears to suggest, fatigue has relocated to the human interior over the past hundred and fifty years or so, what are we to make of the voyage that is charted by Shakespeare, in the opening of Sonnet 27?

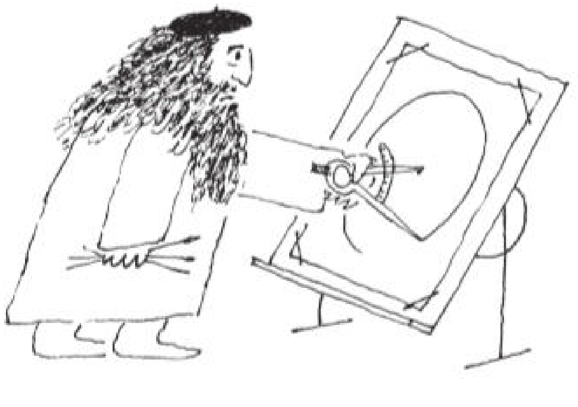
> Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
> The dear repose for limbs with travel tired;
> But then begins a journey in my head,
> To work my mind, when body's work's expired.

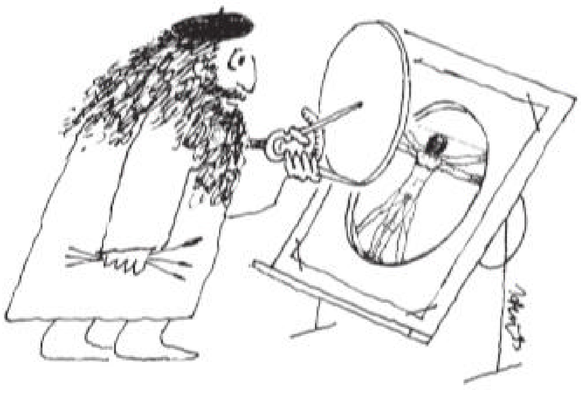
"A journey in my head": it could have been scribbled yesterday, or uttered from a couch to a sympathetic shrink. Maybe Shakespeare should be shrugged off as a weird exception to the psychological rule, or drafted as a very early recruit in what, more than once, Vigarello calls "the onset of modernity."

When *was* that, by the way? Was

there a particular wet afternoon in March, 1744, when mankind, drumming its fingers on the kitchen table, and fed up with the creaky old ways of thinking and behaving, decided to get modern? Few historians can fend off the temptation to wield a broad brush, and Vigarello is a doyen of the bold swipe: "Rationalism was on the rise"; "The home was reinvented." While many readers will be quite content with such swift changes of scene, I'm afraid that skepticism was drilled into me, at a tender age, by Michael Palin and Terry Jones, of "Monty Python" fame. In "Bert Fegg's Nasty Book for Boys and Girls," they came up with this richly educational passage:

> Bill and Enid were coming back through Tadger's Field when suddenly they saw the collapse of Roman Imperialism.
>
> "Gosh," said Bill.
>
> "So, a combination of factors, both economic and social, has brought down the mightiest empire the world has yet seen," murmured Enid.





I thought fondly of Bill and Enid as I read Vigarello's bracing reference to "the rise of individualism, the desire for autonomy and a new concept of the body and also of time itself"—an all-you-can-eat buffet of fresh and tasty ideas. No one will refute, let alone regret, the medical refinements to which Vigarello attests (we are fortunate not to be prescribed "strychnine arsenate" for our nervous headaches, as patients were at the end of the nineteenth century), yet few of us would venture, as he does, to reprimand the past for not doing its homework or keeping up to speed. Like an old-school teacher with a swishing cane, he looks out for knuckles to rap:

> The concept of humors and their loss persisted, without their substance being clarified. The work of measurement and counting, despite its novelty, was at present incomplete and even random; it still was far from precise.

Exactitude alone, however, does not suffice. Here is the verdict on the polymathic mathematician Gerolamo Cardano, who, in 1550, had the uphill job of working out how much energy we expend in walking on a slope rather than on the flat:

> His calculations seemed precise, using specific numbers to compare the actions, but the rationale for his conclusions was sketchy.

Poor Gerolamo! Stay in after class and work on your rationale! And no chatting to Charles Coulomb, that sluggard from the seventeen-eighties in front of you! ("His was a promising start rather than a concrete final result.") Now and then, testimony is chided for simply not existing: "We find no mentions of tennis players or hunters relaxing in a bath after their exertions." Sorry, is that the fault of sixteenth-century Roger Federers for not hurling aside the shower gel and grabbing a pen and paper, or merely a gap in the archives?

Zonked, bushed, or just plain hebetudinous, most readers will be glad to get to the end of "A History of Fatigue." Its virtues are undeniable; it is stoutly industrious and inquisitive, and, in the corralling of evidence, Vigarello shows such dedication that he should seriously consider moonlighting as a homicide detective. Any corpse would give its eyeteeth to have him on the case. The problem is that Vigarello's piling up of information becomes too much to absorb, and he's so frantically busy thinking everything through, as it were, that he neglects to pause for thought. Compare one of his predecessors, the Italian physiologist Angelo Mosso, whose own study of fatigue was published in 1891 and translated into English in 1904. (Vigarello rightly praises him but can't resist a sniff; on the question of circumstantial variables, we are told, "Mosso's work merely hinted at their importance.") Nothing can equip you for the bewitching start of his book:

> One spring, towards the end of March, I happened to be in Rome, and, hearing that the migration of the quails had begun, I went down to Palo on the sea coast in order to ascertain whether these birds, after their journey from Africa, showed any of the phenomena of fatigue. The day after my arrival I rose when it was still dark, took my gun, and walked along the shore towards Fiumicino.

What an opening! How vividly the season, the hour, and the place are established as the curtain is raised. It's plausible, moreover, that Mosso may be harking back, whether or not he's aware of the reverberation, across an expanse of eighteen hundred years, to an even more beautiful excursus, in Pliny's "Natural History." There, too, we track the flight of the long-suffering birds. The quails, Pliny tells us, "desire to be carried by the breeze, because of the weight of their bodies and their small strength (this is the reason for that mournful cry they give while flying, which is wrung from them by fatigue)." No research, however assiduous, could engender such a lyrical perception. It makes us wonder whether wingless beasts, including ourselves, can be left quailing at the demands that are imposed upon us—so much so that we, too, make involuntary music from our frailties.

To indicate how far "A History of Fatigue" lies from Pliny is more of a lament than a criticism. Vigarello is not, lucky fellow, signed up to the literary racket. Regular readers of fiction will be bemused, nonetheless, by his new book, because, in many ways, it's the opposite of literature—an uncanny simulacrum of a novel. It has a story to tell, it bustles with tangible detail, and, above all, it is crammed with characters. The difference is that none of them are granted more than a fleeting quiddity. They exist for a purpose: not to come alive in themselves but to revolve as cogs in the unrelenting engine of the argument. You can all but hear the clicks as the book inches forward, notch by notch. Some folk don't even make the grade as cogs; why bring up brandy drinkers of the eighteenth century, if "the situations were so banal that they are not worth describing"? It is those banalities, needless to say, onto which any thirsty novelist would leap.

Vigarello, on the other hand, prefers to single out those conscientious citizens who, like sociologists-in-waiting, take the trouble to quantify their findings. People such as Jules Lefèvre, who descended the Pic du Midi de Bigorre, in the Pyrenees, in 1904—or, as he said, "more than 20 kilometers of distance and 2,200 meters of incline, the equivalent exerting of 250,000 kilogrammeters in two hours." Vigarello, glowing with approval, adds:

> He explained that he "didn't feel tired" and was "in fine shape," while his companions, despite their "robustness," said they were exhausted, and some even had to drop out.

I long to hear more from the companions, who presumably asked why they had to traipse down a mountain with "a total douchebag," who "wouldn't shut up" about how "fit" he was. What's missing from "A History of Fatigue" is the atmosphere of casual interaction in which most of us dwell, and which is constantly dramatized by our dealings with others, even when there is no drama to be seen:

> "I was tired, father. I have been tired a long time," said Louisa.
>
> "Tired? Of what?" asked the astonished father.
>
> "I don't know of what—of everything, I think."

The father is Thomas Gradgrind, in Dickens's "Hard Times" (1854). In his astonishment, we catch—as we rarely do in Vigarello's compendium of weariness—the daunting disbelief with which the tireless tend to greet, or to mock, anyone who is constitutionally less stalwart than themselves. Thomas, who has an almost Vigarello-like zeal for measuring and anatomizing all that comes within view, is not so much wanting in compassion as incapable of grasping why Louisa should have had enough. Those who go for it, as a rule, will never comprehend the urge to let it be.

What is remarkable, even now, is not just the diligence but the candor with which Dickens and his contemporaries explored the emotional landscape of fatigue. The weekly serialization of "Hard Times" in *Household Words*, a magazine that Dickens edited, was followed by that of Elizabeth Gaskell's "North and South," another novel preoccupied with labors—and, indeed, with the relationship between a father and his daughter. Whether grand or humble, those labors exact a cost:

> Margaret rose from her seat, and began silently to fold up her work. The long seams were heavy, and had an unusual weight for her languid arms. The round lines in her face took a lengthened, straighter form, and her whole appearance was that of one who had gone through a day of great fatigue.

Notice the supple scrutiny with which Gaskell maps the lines graven in Margaret's face onto the seams in the linen, or whatever it is, that she is folding. Fatigue has merged the toiler with her task. When Dickens said that "North and South" was "wearisome in the last degree," his grumbling was a form of tribute; the mood of the book had got to him. Again and again, in a supposedly straitlaced period, feelings of lassitude get carried beyond the confines of what is either comfortable or proper. Though we idly talk of being bored to death, or of dying to do something with our lives, it takes a poet like Tennyson to ask whether such feelings might not swell into a palpable death wish:

> All day within the dreamy house,
> The doors upon their hinges creak'd;
> The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse
> Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek'd,
> Or from the crevice peer'd about.
> Old faces glimmer'd thro' the doors
> Old footsteps trod the upper floors,
> Old voices called her from without.
> She only said, "My life is dreary,
> He cometh not," she said;
> She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
> I would that I were dead!"

That is a stanza from "Mariana" (1830). You can feel the minutiae scratching away at the weariness, inflaming it from the drab into the unbearable. (T. S. Eliot noted that changing "sung" to the more correct "sang" would reduce the force of the line. Vigarello would probably request the decibel rating of the mouse's shriek.) What's extraordinary is that, when John Everett Millais came to paint his version of "Mariana," twenty-one years later, he pushed the legend—derived from "Measure for Measure"—to a further stage. The lonesome woman, pining for her paramour, is depicted in a dress of midnight blue, stretching, with her breast uplifted and her hands at the base of her spine; the posture is a kind of pun, expressing both fatigue (that is how we all like to stretch, at the close of a working day) and a physical craving yet more intense. The death wish is entangled with desire.

And so to one last species of fatigue that Vigarello, keen-eyed as he is, would rather not observe. Would it offend the premise of his book to point out that fatigue can be a joy? Is that why we hear not a murmur of sexual satiety—of lovers who delight in the easeful exhaustion that pleasure-hunting brings? Away from the boudoir, there is the immeasurable Levin, in "Anna Karenina," who, with an eagerness that baffles his fellow-aristocrats as much it would Vigarello, goes to the meadows and cuts grass, alongside the peasants on his estate. He *wants* to be tired—to pass beyond fatigue, by making hay, into a state of uncomplicated bliss. "It was not his arms which swung the scythe but the scythe seemed to mow of itself," Tolstoy writes. "These were the most blessed moments." The moments pass, of course, and the blessing subsides. What enraptures Levin is, for the mowers, one day in a life of toil. His weariness is a dream. ♦

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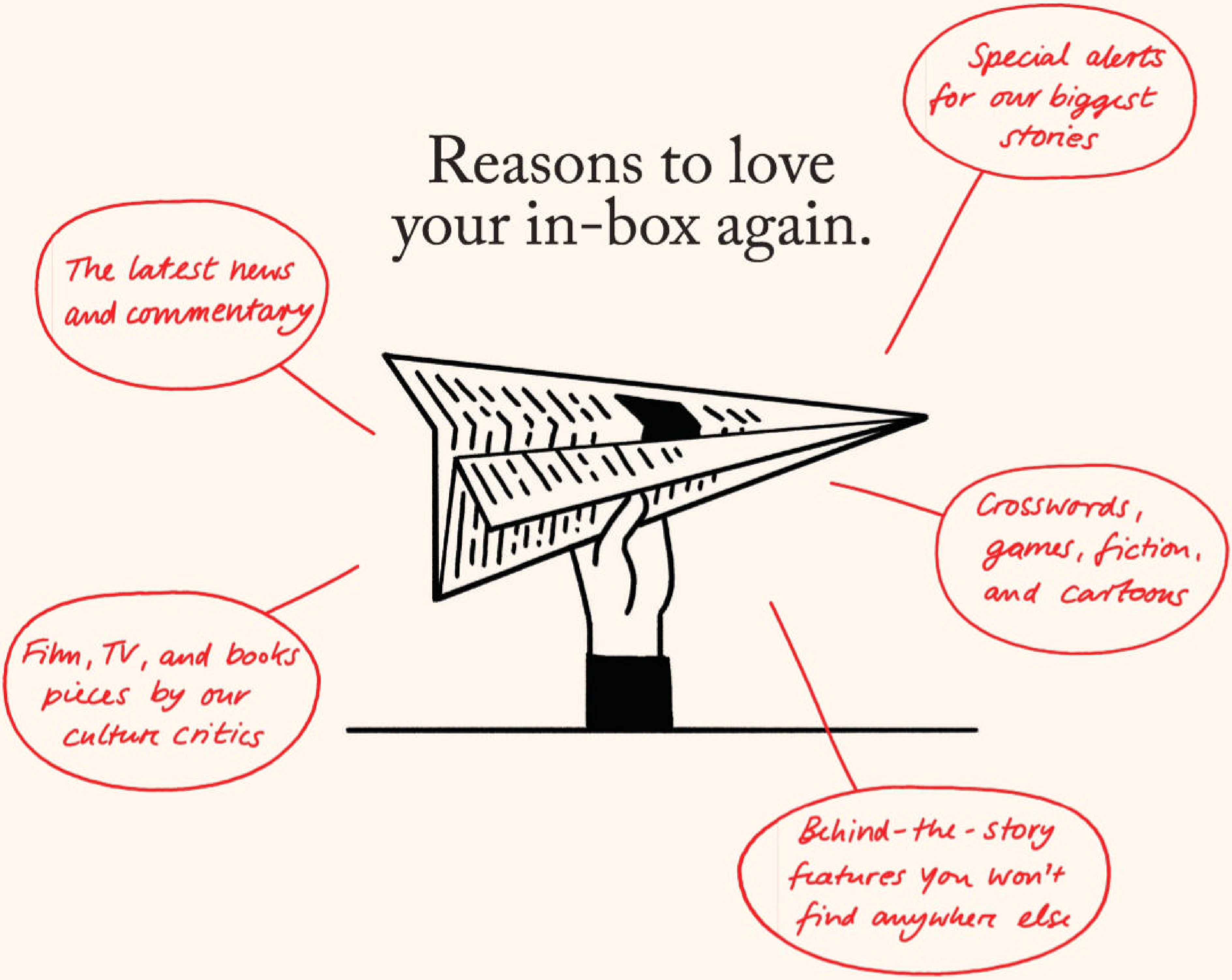
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BOOKS

ODDBALLS AND ODYSSEYS

The road trips, revenge plots, and secret societies of Charles Portis.

BY CASEY CEP

It was a source of some annoyance to Charles Portis that Shakespeare never wrote about Arkansas. As the novelist pointed out, it wasn't, strictly speaking, impossible: Hernando de Soto had ventured to the area in 1541, members of his expedition wrote about their travels in journals that were translated into English, and at least one of those accounts was circulating in London when Shakespeare was working there in 1609. To Portis, it was also perfectly obvious that the exploration of his home state could have been fine fodder for the Bard: "It is just the kind of chronicle he quarried for his plots and characters, and DeSoto, a brutal, devout, heroic man brought low, is certainly of Shakespearean stature. But, bad luck, there is no play, with a scene at the Camden winter quarters, and, in another part of the forest, at Smackover Creek, where willows still grow aslant the brook."

Everything about this grievance is pure Portis. There's the easy erudition—knowing that an English translation of de Soto's journey was published in Shakespeare's lifetime—and the sly allusion, relocating Gertrude's lament for Ophelia to a tributary of the Ouachita River. Then, there's the layer cake of comedy, from the impeccably plucked place name, Smackover Creek, to the possibility that anyone else, even another Arkie, would be miffed that there's no "The Two Gentlemen of Little Rock." Most of all, though, there's a sense of character: de Soto ripped out of the history books, set loose with his arquebus on the American frontier and Shakespeare liberated from the Norton anthology, following the news of the day, as desperate for ideas as any freelancer.

Although Portis's novels have the fun of farce, they also have a relentless plausibility.

Portis knew from characters. His most famous novel, "True Grit," published in 1968 but set mostly in the eighteen-seventies, is narrated by the indomitable Mattie Ross, equal parts Annie Oakley, Carrie Nation, and Captain Ahab. When we first meet her, she's an old maid recalling the adventures of her youth in the Indian Territory. "People do not give it credence that a fourteen-year-old girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood," she explains, "but it did not seem so strange then, although I will say it did not happen every day." She has two Sancho Panzas in the search for her father's killer: the one-eyed federal marshal Rooster Cogburn and the Texas Ranger LaBoeuf, who never discloses his first name but pronounces his surname "LaBeef" and says things like: "I believe she is trying to hooraw you again."

Portis's other novels weren't exactly Westerns—more like Southwesterns, Headed Easterns, and Getting Losterns—but they are all populated by equally memorable figures: Norwood Pratt, who drives all the way across the country just to get the seventy dollars a fellow-marine owes him; Professor Cezar Golescu, an alchemist experimenting with the auriferous qualities of creeping ragweed by testing soil types along the headwaters of the Pig River; Grady Fring, the self-proclaimed "Kredit King," who sells hot cars and shoddy health insurance in Texarkana while serving as a part-time pimp with a "talent agency" in New Orleans; Lamar Jimmerson, who in exchange for his Old Gold cigarettes is given a supposedly sacred text with which he revives a cult called Gnomonism; and Joann the Wonder Hen, a college-educated chicken who wears a mortarboard and answers yes-or-no questions for a nickel.

A new volume by the Library of America, edited by the Arkansas journalist Jay Jennings, gathers all these characters and more, collecting Portis's five novels together with his short stories

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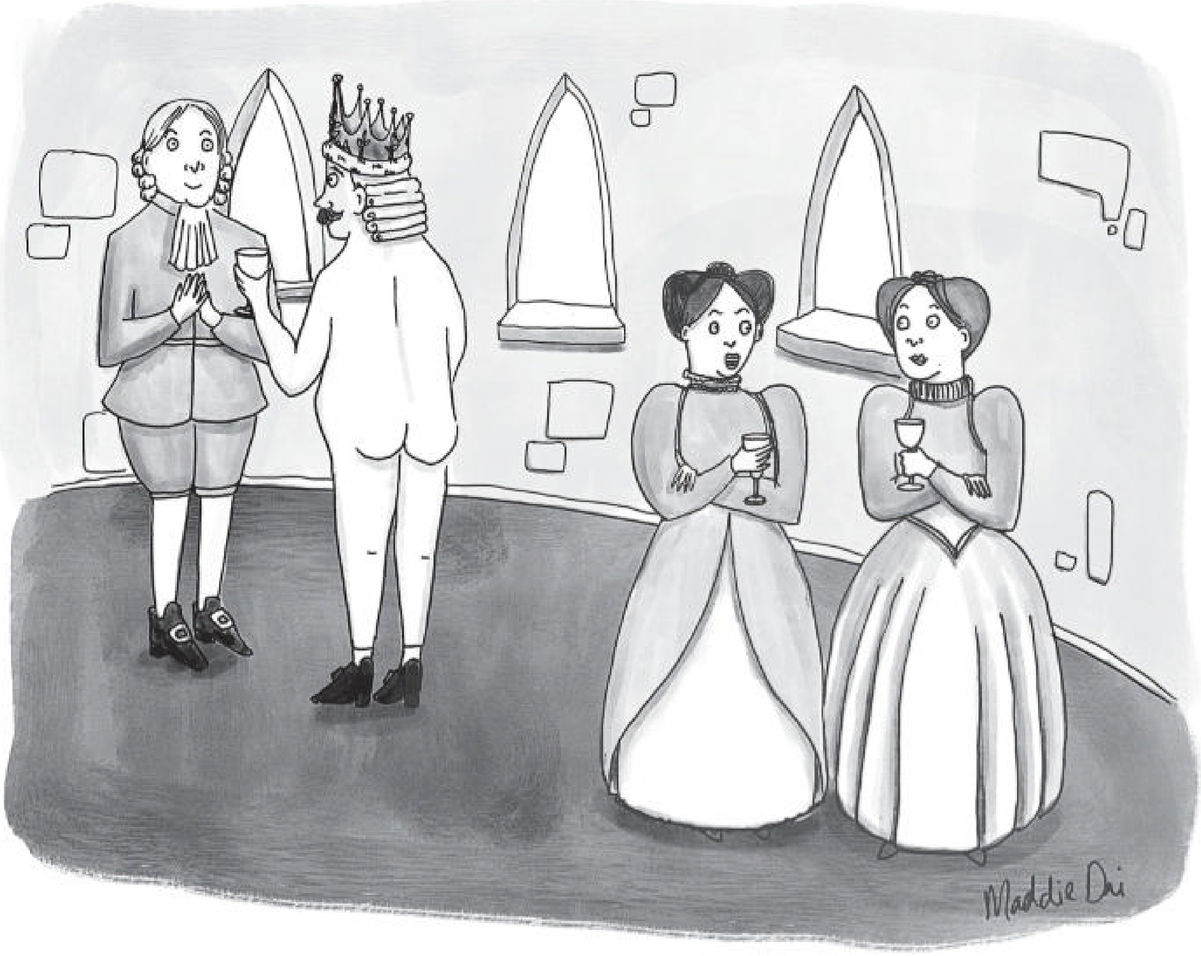


"I don't mind his penis always being out. I do find his relentless suppression of the peasants a bit unseemly."

• •

and some of his journalism, including the parody of an advice column that ran in this magazine. It's absurdly fun to follow his oddballs and their odysseys, but something more than fun, too. Portis's genius went beyond character in the strictly literary sense, to reveal something about moral character and many somethings about the character of this country.

Portis was a character, too. Born in El Dorado, Arkansas, he grew up along the Louisiana border, moving between such places as Norphlet, Mount Holly, and Hamburg. Great-grandfathers on both sides of his family fought for the Confederacy; one of them was born the same year as Jesse James and lived long enough to tell Portis about the hundreds of federal mules that were set loose by fleeing Yankees in the canebrakes of the Saline River. His father, Samuel, was a schoolteacher and superintendent; his mother, Alice, the daughter of a Methodist minister, dabbled in newspaper writing, including a column called "Gal Thursday." He had two younger brothers, Richard and Jonathan, and an older sister named Alice Kate, who generally went by Aliece to keep from being confused with their mother.

The Library of America volume includes a spectacular if all too short essay titled "Combinations of Jacksons," in which Portis recounts his childhood on the Gulf Coastal Plain. By the light of day, he and his friends assembled model airplanes and tried to swing from vines like Tarzan; by "dusk-dark," when flying squirrels were gliding through the front yard, they'd go set their trotlines in streams. His formative exposure to literature came from the "funny books" he bought for ten cents apiece, featuring not only Batman and Superman but also Bulletman, the Sandman, Plastic Man, and Doll Man; one of his earliest forays into artistry involved, aptly, a mail-order course in ventriloquism. His family was chock-full of "strong and fluent talker[s] with far-ranging opinions," like his great-uncle Satterfield Fielding, who, Portis writes, "may well have been the last man in America who without being facetious called food 'vittles,'" and who convinced his great-nephew that dipping W. E. Garrett & Sons Scotch Snuff could protect him from tuberculosis.

There were a lot of tall tales, but a shortage of gasoline and candy bars: oil was being saved around the country for the war effort, and the sweets, local rumor had it, were being given to the German P.O.W.s at Camp Chaffee and to the Japanese Americans held in the internment camps at Rohwer and Jerome. Portis spent years trying to learn to breathe underwater with snorkels made from creek-bank reeds in case any of the Axis powers arrived in Arkansas and he couldn't fight them off with his pinecone grenades. After he graduated from Hamburg High School, during the Korean War, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. Jennings writes that Portis was turned away from officer training because he lacked "natural molars on the lower right side." Still, he worked his way up from infantryman to sergeant.

Portis was given medals for his service; perhaps more significant, a corporal at Camp Lejeune gave him a copy of Thomas Wolfe's "Look Homeward, Angel." Later, when he enrolled at the University of Arkansas, he majored in journalism and worked for the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, editing "lady stringers" like his mother, who submitted social reports and gossip sheets. After that, he got hired as a reporter by the *Commercial Appeal*, in Memphis, and then the *Arkansas Gazette*, in Little Rock, covering everything from civil rights to rock and roll. He sent some of those clips to the New York *Herald Tribune* and got himself a job on the general-assignment desk. He moved to Manhattan and filed features about a Brooklynite with a pet lion, the National Barber Show convention, and his own failures with the "Five-Day Plan to Stop Smoking" at the Bates Memorial Medical Center in Yonkers. During the '62 newspaper strike, he worked briefly at *Newsweek*, where he met and dated Nora Ephron, who praised his "spectacular and entirely eccentric style" in her memoir, joking that it was so good it made him awful "at writing the formulaic, voiceless, unbylined stories with strict line counts" that the magazine required. Back at the *Herald Tribune*, he worked alongside Jimmy Breslin, Lewis Lapham, and Tom Wolfe. "He was polite enough not to roll his eyes when I asked if he might be related to the other Thomas Wolfe," Portis remembered later, long after he'd been promoted to the paper's

London bureau, a post that he liked to point out was "Karl Marx's old job."

The dean of New Journalism had more than patience for Portis. In the 1972 manifesto that defined the movement, Wolfe memorialized his colleague and summed up his gear shift from journalist to novelist: "Portis did it in a way that was so much like the way it happens in the dream, it was unbelievable. One day he suddenly quit as London correspondent for the *Herald Tribune*. That was generally regarded as a very choice job in the newspaper business. Portis quit cold one day; just like that, without a warning. He returned to the United States and moved into a fishing shack in Arkansas. In six months he wrote a beautiful little novel called *Norwood*. Then he wrote *True Grit*, which was a best seller. The reviews were terrific . . . he sold both books to the movies. . . . He made a fortune. . . . A *fishing* shack! In *Arkansas*! It was too goddamned perfect to be true."

"A lot of people leave Arkansas and most of them come back sooner or later," Portis once wrote. "They can't quite achieve escape velocity." It wasn't the novelist speaking, but one of his characters, the narrator of his third book, "The Dog of the South." Published more than a decade after "True Grit," the picaresque novel is essentially one long monologue by Raymond E. Midge, a cuckolded Little Rock copy editor who is trying to track down his wife, Norma, and her ex-husband turned new lover, Guy Dupree, a co-worker whom Midge recently bailed out of jail after the man was arrested for writing menacing letters to the President. The two lovebirds have fled to Belize (at the time, British Honduras) in Midge's blue Ford Torino, stealing not only his car but also his credit cards and his prized cassette tape of the Ole Miss professor Dr. Buddy Casey's lecture on the Siege of Vicksburg.

Any given page of "The Dog of the South" has as much plot as some novellas. Midge finally meets the titular dog more than a thousand miles into his quest; it turns out to be a brokedown school bus turned camper painted all white except for the black-lettered name on the side. A little while later, at a bar in San Miguel de Allende called the Cucaracha, he encounters the bus's owner, Dr. Reo Symes, who wants to hitch a ride in Midge's borrowed '63 Buick Special, because he's trying to get to Belize to persuade his missionary mother to give him the deed, or at least the development rights, to an island she owns in the Mississippi River. Another thousand miles of road-tripping follows, with Symes passing the time by explaining to Midge how he lost his medical license and all the ways he now makes money without it: a sports-betting scheme that depends on beating other bookies via the time zones; a publishing scheme involving a series of short biographies of Texas county supervisors called "Stouthearted Men"; a jewelry scheme wherein he sells "birthstone rings and vibrating jowl straps."

But the hardest sell the Louisianan makes isn't for himself. It is for a self-help guru named John Selmer Dix, who, Symes explains, wrote his best book on the express bus between Dallas and Los Angeles, riding back and forth for an entire year to finish his masterpiece, "With Wings as Eagles." "Dix puts William Shakespeare in the shithouse," Symes says by way of endorsement. When Portis returns to the subject of Dix a few chapters later, suddenly there's a Dix museum, lost Dix manuscripts in a missing tin steamer trunk he carried with him on the bus rides, and Dix impersonators in Fort Worth, Jacksonville, and Odessa. "The Dog of the South" sounds shaggy, and it is; so is almost everything else Portis wrote. "Anything I set out to do degenerates pretty quickly into farce," he once explained.

That's true, yet Portis was selling himself short. Although his novels have the fun of farce, part of what's so charming about them is their relentless plausibility. Many of us have met someone like Reo Symes, usually while he's holding court on a barstool or a street corner, and we've all talked with a character like Ray Midge, often on an airplane when there's no way to change seats. Even the most outlandish of Portis plots are populated by the kind of Everymen found in almost every Zip Code in this country: barmaids, shopkeeps, shade-tree mechanics, high-and-dry hippies, would-be writers, secretaries, veterans, junkyard scrappers. They are themselves a kind of Library of Americans, and Portis is excellent not only on their day jobs but also on their daydreams and stray thoughts and endogenous knowledge of the world. His characters know things like the last year coins were made of silver, the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, how to jump a car and free a rusty flywheel, the going price of cotton or PVC pipe, what to do about dirt-dobber nests, and the number of Vienna sausages in a can. Portis's own remarkable store of knowledge began to dwindle only when he developed Alzheimer's. He died from complications of that disease in 2020, and was buried in the city where he graduated from high school.

His last novel, "Gringos," published in 1991, is narrated by Jimmy Burns, another great monologuist from Ark-La-Tex who served with the First Marine Division in the Korean War and has gone to live in Mérida, Mexico. (When there was nowhere west left to go, Portis's characters started going south.) "Christmas again in Yucatán," he says with a sigh in the opening line. "Another year gone and I was still scratching around on this limestone peninsula." He used to make a living by selling looted Mayan artifacts, but now he's gone legit, delivering supplies to archeological digs while tracking down bail jumpers and runaways for the reward money. If Marshall Rooster Cogburn of "True Grit" had been born a century later, he might have been renting the room next to Burns's at the Posada Fausto, both of them dreaming of striking it rich enough to move into the local trailer park. Here is the reference letter one Mayanist sent on the man's behalf to some Mormons in search of the Jaredites: "Jimmy Burns is a pretty good sort of fellow with a mean streak. Hard worker. Solitary as a snake. Punctual. Mutters and mumbles. Trustworthy. Facetious."

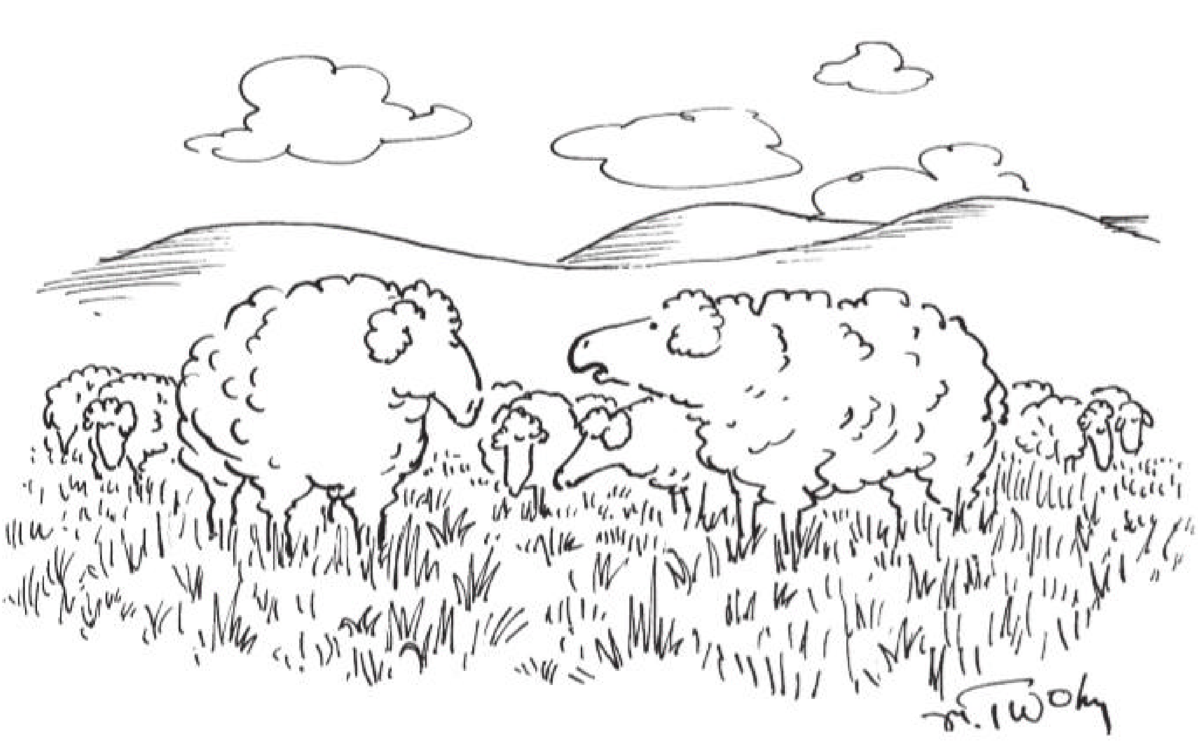
"Punctual!" Burns thinks, "the puniest of virtues, nothing to brag about, but Doc was right, I was always on time." Portis's novels are full of plainspoken discussions, like this, of moral character, but his characters never sound like virtue ethicists. The descendants of circuit riders and frontier evangelists, they are trying to make sense of the moral universe they've inherited and the modern world they're making as the gravitational pull of grander virtues weakens.

These puny, lower-order virtues steadily emerge from Portis's revenge plots, road trips, and secret societies; not just punctuality but competence, frugality, and grit. Knowing how to repair an engine or change a tire or read a map isn't what Aristotle had in mind, but these skills are highly valorized here; so are haggling, bartering, and not overpaying for anything. Persisting in your quest—whether you're searching for the coward who shot your father and stole his two gold pieces, your soon-to-be ex-wife, Norma, the self-help genius John Selmer Dix, or Pletho Pappus and the Telluric Currents of the New Cycle of the Gnomon Society—is meritorious, even if, when you find said person, you have nothing to show for it.

The always on time Jimmy Burns, for example, is surrounded by people searching for higher powers and deeper meaning: the U.F.O. enthusiasts who think that Mayan ruins hold proof of their extraterrestrial theories; the hippies convinced that human sacrifice on an ancient altar will bring about the end of the world; the academics trying to decipher hieroglyphics and make sense of human history. But Burns is just trying to get by and get paid, and, in lieu of anything loftier, he finds sufficient satisfaction in this: "You put things off and then one morning you wake up and say—today I will change the oil in my truck."

The virtues of auto maintenance turn out to be considerable; Burns ends up on his quest because of someone else's car trouble. His grandfather was "a Methodist preacher, who included the Dionne quintuplets and the Postmaster General in his long, itemized prayers," and Burns, ministerial in his own modern way, comes to feel responsible for the fate of Rudy Kurle, one of the flying-saucer fellows, whose Checker Marathon and pop-top tent trailer the marine helps tow after a failed river fording. Kurle hopes to find traces of the "space dwarfs" he thinks come and go from the Yucatán using "photon propulsion," but when he goes missing Burns, having already rescued his rig, rescues the researcher himself. In keeping with the questing genre, Burns is compensated for his trouble with romance; in keeping with these novels, even that compensation is modest. "We were comfortable enough," Burns says of the love of his life. "We didn't get on each other's nerves in close confinement."

That move is as Portisian as they come, at once hilariously deflationary and hopelessly tender. Life's highways aren't all made of asphalt; Portis's plots hark back to those moral pilgrimages of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Bunyan. But the stakes in his work are never quite salvation or damnation—there's nowhere as high as Heaven or as low as Hell. Instead, his pilgrims traverse the eschatological latitudes in between, relying for guidance on the modern scriptures of advertising, legal writs, and road signs. Like other postwar novelists from Jack Kerouac to Patricia Highsmith, Portis preferred the theatre of the automobile to the battlefield or the courtroom. During high school, he'd worked at a Chevrolet dealership, and one suspects that the road trip became his form not only by grand literary design but from genuine delight. It's hard to imagine a writer who loved auto parts, cheap motels, or U.S.G.S. maps more: the Gnomons come to rest in La Coma, Texas; Ms. Mattie Ross hails from Yell County, Arkansas; Portis himself once wrote a love letter to the three-dollar-a-night cabin he found in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. Life's a quest whether or not you want one, and the obstacles Portis's characters face are allergic to allegory and symbolism; their rewards, even at their most fantastical, are humble and fleeting. In a Portis novel, when you ride off into the sunset you have to make camp in the dark.



"It's tough sticking to a diet when you're surrounded by temptation."

"True Grit" doesn't end with a sunset ride but with what's left of the Wild West going gray and getting stiff in a travelling museum. Mattie Ross lives long enough to find Jesse James's brother sipping Coca-Colas with Cole Younger in a Pullman car, the pair waiting to stage a vaudeville show in the stadium of the Memphis Chicks, a minor-league baseball team. "Spectators can watch this unique exhibition in perfect safety," brays an advertisement in the *Commercial Appeal*, the newspaper where Portis worked in his early days as a journalist. (That line and so many others are masterfully delivered by the novelist Donna Tartt in the audiobook. Two film adaptations have brought the novel to the screen, but the Mississippi Delta native bests both, drawing on a lifetime of experience, since Tartt's mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother all read the book out loud to her. She distills that inheritance into a version that is a hundred-and-eighty-proof, comic and almost deadly.)

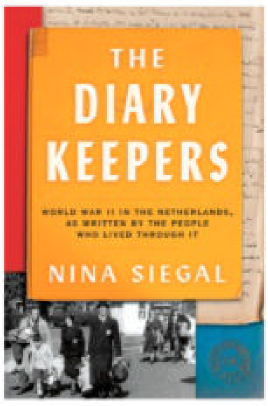
"Perfect safety" seems like a pretty good deal compared with getting shot to death outside a rooming house or losing your arm to a rattlesnake, but it is the unmistakable position of Mattie Ross that this spectator life is postlapsarian and that in fact all of American life is lapsing more than ever before. Already in the nineteenth century you had to go looking for a man with true grit because most of them didn't have any, and the few who did were soon dead and buried while others charged admission to pantomime the past. Even the brave girl who "avenged Frank Ross's blood over in the Choctaw Nation when snow was on the ground" grew up to be a banker, hassling farmers over crop loans and denying mortgage extensions. Worse than that, she's become a lady memoirist—a writer, of all things, the least honorable vocation in a Portis novel.

Mattie Ross has aged into believing the great American nostalgic fallacy, the unshakable certainty that everything was better in the olden days. Many of Portis's characters share this sense that all things, including one's own moral fibre, are diminished from what they were. Today, this kind of nostalgia is nearly always invidious, but in Portis's novels it manifests mostly as sentimentality or silliness. If only more political theorists and op-ed columnists shared Portis's gift for humor and understood its absolute lethality. "One's father was invariably a better man than one's self, and one's grandfather better still," a Gnomon says in "Masters of Atlantis," but he's in the middle of expounding a theory that he calls "bio-entropy," wherein humanity is "steadily degenerating into lower and lower forms, ultimately back to mud."

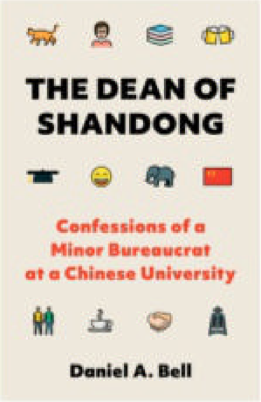
Mattie Ross is too devoted to the Presbyterian Church ever to fall for Gnomonism, but plenty of Portis characters could and do. Conspiracies and con men are always cropping up in his novels, not just new religions and cult leaders but swindlers and snake-oil sellers of all stripes. They flourish because of another American impulse, nostalgia's mirror image: the wild optimism that everything will be better if you join the right fraternity, find the right guru, eat the right root vegetables, or read the right book.

Gullibility comes in as many forms as guile, and Portis is as good on the duped as he is on the duping. That might be because the novelist was a little bit of both: enchanted by America, especially by Arkansas, and willing to both buy it and sell it. He understood too much about this country to mythologize it, but he loved his compatriots too much and too tenderly to scorn them. ♦

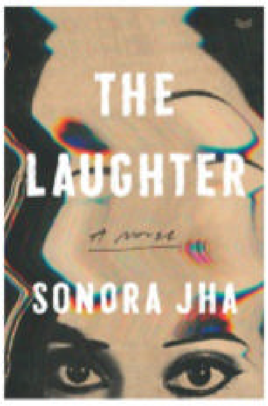
BRIEFLY NOTED


THE DIARY KEEPERS
WORLD WAR II IN THE NETHERLANDS, AS WRITTEN BY THE PEOPLE WHO LIVED THROUGH IT
NINA SIEGAL

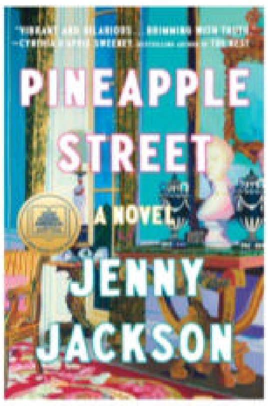
The Diary Keepers, *by Nina Siegal (Ecco).* Nearly three-quarters of the Dutch Jewish population was murdered in the Holocaust, yet after the Second World War the Netherlands claimed a national memory of unified defiance. In a challenge to this account, Siegal has assembled the wartime diaries of seven Dutch citizens, among them a Jewish journalist, the wife of an S.S. official, and a shopkeeper active in the Resistance. Though diaries may be myopic and self-images fallible—as exemplified in the puffed-up scribblings of a Nazi-sympathizing policeman—it's clear these diarists saw enough, Siegal writes, to respond to horror. She casts "bearing witness" as an impure but essential act and history as mutable, a story told and understood not by one but by many.



The Dean of Shandong, *by Daniel A. Bell (Princeton).* In 2017, Bell, a Canadian scholar, was appointed the dean of Shandong University's School of Political Science and Public Administration—a thousand-student-strong division in the leading university of a Chinese province of more than a hundred million people. Bell places the minutiae of academic administration in the context of China's post-Cultural Revolution attempt to reinstate a "complex bureaucratic system informed by the ideal of political meritocracy." His depiction of this goal's uneven achievement is enriched by anecdotes about censorship, corruption, the importance of seemingly frivolous aesthetic matters, Shandong's drinking culture, and the occasionally comic failures of Chinese institutions to convey their aims abroad.



The Laughter, *by Sonora Jha (HarperVia).* The protagonist of this biting novel, set in the days before the 2016 election, is Oliver Harding, a G. K. Chesterton specialist at a liberal-arts college near Seattle. Harding spends his days in misguided pursuit of a Pakistani law professor, who is caring for a nephew who has had a series of run-ins with the French police. Jha slowly reveals the paltriness of Harding's inner life—his racist suspicions about the nephew, his damaged relationship with his ex-wife and daughter, his near-constant womanizing and reactionary moralizing. As the campus is swept by a wave of student-led anti-racist protests, he discovers far too late that he has been "invited to something, to a nearness and vastness I still don't understand."



Pineapple Street, *by Jenny Jackson (Pamela Dorman).* This engaging début novel centers on a family of wealthy real-estate moguls, the Stocktons, living in the historically preserved "fruit streets" of Brooklyn Heights. The story's focus alternates among the eldest of the family's three grown children, who has forsaken her career for motherhood; the youngest, who works off her hangovers with tennis; and the wife of the lone male scion, whose middle-class background stands in contrast to her husband's upper-crust one. "I know you get all awkward and WASPy whenever it comes up," she tells him. She is unfairly accused by her sisters-in-law of gold-digging, but, in the end, none of the despicable rich we meet are really so despicable; some punches are pulled to maintain the story's levity.

POP MUSIC

AMAZING GRACE

The otherworldly compositions of an Ethiopian nun.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

"I asked God that my name be written on Heaven, not on Earth," Emahoy said.

COURTESY EMAHOY TSEGE MARIAM MUSIC FOUNDATION

In 1997, Buda Musique, a French record label, launched "Éthiopiques," a multivolume CD series that collected songs from Ethiopia's golden age of pop music—an era that began in the late sixties and lasted until the mid-seventies, when a military junta overthrew the Ethiopian Empire and smothered musical output with repressive policies, including curfews. Before the coup, the evening air over Addis Ababa was rich with sound: the pentatonic scales of traditional Ethiopian music, the chromatic scales of Western jazz, the bodied grooves of American soul and funk. Swinging Addis, as the city was later known, nurtured dozens of extraordinary musicians, including the Ethio-jazz titan Mulatu Astatke; the "Ethiopian Elvis," Alèmayèhu Eshèté; and the beloved tenor Tilahun Gessesse, who was given a state funeral when he died, in 2009. For anyone unfamiliar with the scene—in the pre-streaming days, it was nearly impossible for Western listeners to acquire these records—each new installment of "Éthiopiques" was thrilling.

For me, one disk in particular—Volume XXI, released in 2006—is unusually lovely. It features only the pianist Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou, a nun in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church ("Emahoy," by which she is generally known, is a religious honorific), and includes material drawn from charity albums. Emahoy's music can be difficult for critics to categorize. It's occasionally (and somewhat inexplicably) described as blues or jazz (a radio documentary once referred to her as "the Honky Tonk Nun"), though it is more clearly informed by the Western classical canon and ancient liturgical chants. Mostly, her playing evokes the delicacy and grace of early spring: a sparrow alighting on a branch, a wildflower bending toward the sun, a tiny, persistent sorrow. It's the sort of thing—soothing, meditative, elegant—that immediately softens everyone who hears it.

This month, Mississippi Records (a label known for championing "the discarded music of the world," as the artist and musician Lonnie Holley once put it) will release three LPs by Emahoy, including reissues of her first album and a compilation from 2016. It will also put out a brand-new record, called "Jerusalem." Three tracks on "Jerusalem" are taken from "The Hymn of Jerusalem," a ten-inch that Emahoy made in 1970, of which only a couple of copies are known to be extant; the rest are pulled from home-recorded tapes, likely made in the eighties. The rediscovered material is an unexpected windfall. "Quand la Mer Furieuse" is the first encounter most listeners will have with Emahoy's tender, searching, almost childlike singing voice. But it's the title track, an unaccompanied piano piece, that feels the most revelatory. "Jerusalem" is full of a poignancy and an ache that recall Erik Satie's "Gymnopédies" and Debussy's Arabesque No. 1. "The holy city Jerusalem had centuries of tragedies," Emahoy writes in the album notes. Her performance is plainly elegiac, but it is also suffused with a sense of survival: we are broken, we are wounded, we carry on.

Emahoy was born on December 12, 1923, to a prominent Ethiopian family. When she was six, she and her sister, Senedu, left Addis Ababa to attend boarding school in Switzerland. (They were among the first Ethiopian girls to ever study abroad.) She took courses in violin and piano, and when she returned home in 1933 she was invited to play for the emperor, Haile Selassie, at his palace. Two years later, Italy invaded Ethiopia, and, by May of 1936, Selassie had been forced into exile. Three of Emahoy's brothers were executed; Emahoy was sent to a prison camp on the island of Asinara. After the Second World War, Emahoy worked as a secretary for the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry. She continued to study music, now with the Polish violinist Alexander Kontorowicz, in Cairo, practicing the violin for four hours a day and the piano for five. Kontorowicz later agreed to return with her to Ethiopia, where he was appointed the musical director of the Imperial Body Guard's band.

Eventually, Emahoy was offered a scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Music, in London, but she was denied permission to attend by Ethiopian authorities. This part of her story is a little blurry. "It was His willing," she said when asked about it by the reporter Kate Molleson, in 2017, for the *Guardian*. She added, for BBC radio, "I didn't want to be famous, really. I asked God that my name be written on Heaven, not on Earth." Yet Emahoy fell into a heavy depression, refusing to consume anything other than coffee for twelve days. She was taken to the hospital, and it briefly seemed as though she might not survive. An Orthodox priest gave the last rites. Emahoy slept for more than twelve hours, and then, she said, she woke up with a peaceful mind.

Emahoy made her way to the Gishen Mariam monastery, which is located atop a holy mountain in a remote corner of the Wollo Province. By her early twenties, she had become a nun and been given a religious name, Tsegué-Maryam. There was no running water or electricity at the monastery; Emahoy went barefoot, and slept on a bed made from mud. She abandoned her musical practice. A decade later, after the patriarch who led Gishen Mariam died, she moved back in with her mother in Addis Ababa, and began playing again. In the sixties, she started an intense study of St. Yared, a sixth-century Aksumite composer credited with developing liturgical music for the Ethiopian Orthodox church. In 1984, she left the country and took up residence at a convent in Jerusalem.

The pianist and composer Thomas Feng is currently working on a doctoral dissertation at Cornell on Emahoy's annotated manuscripts and recordings, with the hope of identifying "stylistic consistencies that can be synthesized into a coherent performance practice" for future generations of pianists. Feng, who first encountered Emahoy via "Éthiopiques," was drawn to what he described as her "elastic sense of rhythm" and her melodic inventiveness. Yet there was an extramusical appeal to her story, too. "Early on, I was inspired by this notion that someone out there was making music on their own and being free," he told me recently. I had e-mailed Feng to ask about the religious components of Emahoy's work—what she may have pulled from the Orthodox tradition. He mentioned her interest in the *mahlet*, a canticle chanted on Orthodox feast days, then said that he also recognized something more private in her evocations of the divine. "If I were to hear religiosity in her music, I think it would be as a prayer, between herself and the sacred, not public-facing," he said.

This past winter, with the help of Cyrus Moussavi, the archivist and filmmaker who runs Mississippi Records, I connected with Emahoy on Viber, a messaging app. We had trouble getting an interview time right. Sometimes I would wake up in the morning and see that I'd missed several video calls while I was sleeping. Once, she sent me three animated GIFs of a little creature sobbing into a pillow and kicking its legs. I tried passing along my questions as a voice memo, but my recording was difficult for her to hear. In early March, Moussavi told me that Emahoy had been admitted to the hospital. An interview seemed unlikely now. "I'm really sorry for the bad news. Praying for Emahoy," he wrote. On March 26th, Emahoy died in Jerusalem, at the age of ninety-nine. Of course I cursed myself for not rolling over, shaking off any grogginess, and picking up my phone. What would I have asked? More about her childhood, maybe, or what her depression felt like, or how someone who had survived an invasion by Mussolini might think about the contemporary reëmergence of fascism. Yet, in a way, it was all incidental. Her music had come to feel entirely self-evident to me. There wasn't much I could ask of it that it hadn't already answered. ♦

MEALS on WHEELS

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MUSICAL EVENTS

DE MINIMIS

Max Richter's doleful arpeggios, and Cassandra Miller's piercing lament.

BY ALEX ROSS

Richter's pieces exude a gentle fatalism, a numbed acquiescence.

The film scores of John Williams are beloved by untold millions. Philip Glass's name is known to a good fraction of the population. Arvo Pärt's sonic visions entrance audiences around the world. But, if cultural relevance is measured in sheer saturating ubiquity, the composer of our moment is the fifty-seven-year-old British minimalist Max Richter, who, according to his record label, Deutsche Grammophon, has produced the "most streamed classical record of all time." That album, released in 2015, is titled "Sleep." It lasts eight and a half hours and is designed to facilitate a full night's slumber. Richter has also produced an extended compositional remix of "The Four Seasons," transforming Vivaldi's kinetic concertos into something spacey and amorphous. His customary mode, as in his soundtrack for the dystopian HBO series "The Leftovers," is slowly unspooling, painstakingly repetitive melancholia.

Richter's most inescapable creation is a six-minute juggernaut of wistfulness titled "On the Nature of Daylight," which first appeared in 2004, on an album called "The Blue Notebooks," on the indie label FatCat Records. (D.G. rereleased the album in 2018, in an expanded version.) The piece has been featured in a slew of movies, from "Shutter Island" to "Arrival," and recently heralded a scene of gay double suicide in the series "The Last of Us," also dystopian. It is built around a recurring block of hymnal chords in the key of B-flat minor. We first hear the chords alone; then a solo violin unfurls a languid ribbon of eighth notes over them; more voices are added, with aching suspensions; there is a mild crescendo. The chords are often inverted, with a note other than the root in the bass, resulting in a chorale-like, let-us-pray atmosphere. There's no melody as such, but the violin line, sliding upward by steps and drooping by fifths, sticks in the mind. It's an earworm that actually moves like a worm.

This music has the air of being outside of time, yet it emerges from a long history, going back to the mysterious simplicities of Erik Satie. Minimalism of the nineteen-seventies and eighties is the main point of departure. Richter's work matches a definition that the composer and critic Tom Johnson proposed in 1972, when he described the output of La Monte Young, Steve Reich, and Glass as "flat, static, minimal, and hypnotic." (Johnson is quoted in Kerry O'Brien and William Robin's new anthology, "On Minimalism," which gives a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon.) Richter also has ties to the allied world of ambient music, whose emblematic document is Brian Eno's "Music for Airports," from 1978. Victor Szabo, in his recent book "Turn On, Tune In, Drift Off: Ambient Music's Psychedelic Past," characterizes the genre as "uniform, predictable, and understated, music without obtrusive changes in instrumentation or volume to draw the ear, music without harmonic or rhythmic surprises." The late Ryuichi Sakamoto was a distinguished, eccentric practitioner.

In this dreamy arena, Richter has found a distinctive voice, although his debt to Glass is considerable, to say the least. His piece "November," which figures in "The Leftovers," strongly resembles the closing track of Glass's "Mishima" score. Richter is, however, more ethereal than insistent in his endless arpeggiation. Classic minimalism follows a logic of gradual change, so that apparently uniform landscapes undergo, over time, a radical transformation; Richter's pieces usually wind up not far from where they began. At the same time, his tendency to subject his materials to modest elaboration takes him away from ambient music in the strict sense. "On the Nature of Daylight" is closer in design to Pachelbel's notorious Canon, the peak of the ambient Baroque. It starts, it adds layers, it swells, it expires.

ILLUSTRATION BY PABLO AMARGO

Some classical diehards may be offended that so venerable a label as D.G. is hawking Richter's confections, or that other labels are offering a welter of like-minded, often curiously named artists (Moux, LYR, Yaffle, RIOPY, Balmorhea). In fact, labels have long used mass-market successes to finance less commercial projects. Goddard Lieberson, the legendary chief of Columbia Records, funnelled proceeds from "My Fair Lady" and "The Sound of Music" into surveys of Webern and Stravinsky. Nor does Richter commit any great outrage against taste or craft. I can spend an hour or two in his boutiquey spaces without feeling the urge to flee. I can't say the same of the New Agey noodlings of Ludovico Einaudi, who, confusingly, has been described as "the most streamed classical artist of all time."

What troubles me about Richter's enterprise is, ultimately, its inoffensiveness. The music is impassive, deferential, anonymous. This is why Hollywood soundtrack supervisors push it so hard. If the audience recognized "On the Nature of Daylight" every time, it wouldn't be as effective. Somehow, it keeps erasing itself and making itself new. We've come a long way from minimalism's pioneer days, when scandals erupted in concert halls and established composers spluttered in fury. Minimalism was countercultural and iconoclastic; ambient music, likewise, echoed utopian ideals, as Szabo shows. Richter's pieces exude a gentle fatalism, a numbed acquiescence. Don't worry, be pensive. As we sleepwalk toward global disaster, these algorithmic elegies promise that we will dissolve into mist before the abyss opens.

In the midst of my meanderings through the Richter maze, I heard, via an online stream, the world première of Cassandra Miller's "I cannot love without trembling," a desolate, radiant concerto for viola and orchestra. Miller, a Canadian composer based in London, has her own affiliations with the complicated lineage of minimalist and ambient music, although she is too idiosyncratic an artist to be slotted into a single category. Her work generally moves at an unhurried pace, employing loops, ostinatos, and other repetitive structures. Yet its progress is as unpredictable as it is methodical. Simple harmonies cloud over, fixed tones melt into glissandos, squalls of noise blow in. A chaotic humanness animates this zone of the minimalist multiverse, with the singing voice front and center.

Miller often immerses herself in found musical objects: a Maria Callas recording, an American Baptist hymn, birdsong. She goes through an obsessive phase of listening to her sources and mimicking them with her voice. She then transfers her impressions to the page, weaving around them a finely varied musical fabric. The title of her new score comes from Simone Weil: "Human existence is so fragile a thing and exposed to such dangers that I cannot love without trembling." The melodic material is derived from a haunting handful of recordings made by the Greek American fiddler Alexis Zoumbas in the early twentieth century—documents that, in turn, draw on the age-old lamenting songs of Epirus, in Greece. Miller asks her soloist to study not only the Zoumbas tracks but also her own sung replicas of them.

This fragmented, mediated process yields an experience of bruising immediacy. The concerto's première took place at the Klarafestival, in Brussels, and is streaming at the Belgian site VRT. Lawrence Power gives a staggering account of the solo part, with Ilan Volkov and the Brussels Philharmonic providing vehement support. As the viola delivers its keening, cawing songs, the orchestra becomes a chamber of resonances and reverberations: the strings quiver in sympathy, the brass cast brooding shadows, a piccolo alights with bird-like chatter. We end where we begin, with a glimmer of harp, but something colossal has transpired.

Other quotations from Weil are inscribed over sections of Miller's score. One of them reads, "Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer." The piece itself demands such devotional attention, although, given the complex provenance of its sources, it doesn't pass itself off as a pure, sacred vessel. The atmosphere of lamentation is engulfing—so much so that you could hear the work as one more apocalyptic lullaby for an anxious age. Yet the emotions are too ragged and potent to leave you in a daze of sadness. Shards of memory pierce the illusion of a seamless ritual. Sorrow edges into rage. This is music that reminds us how to cry. ♦

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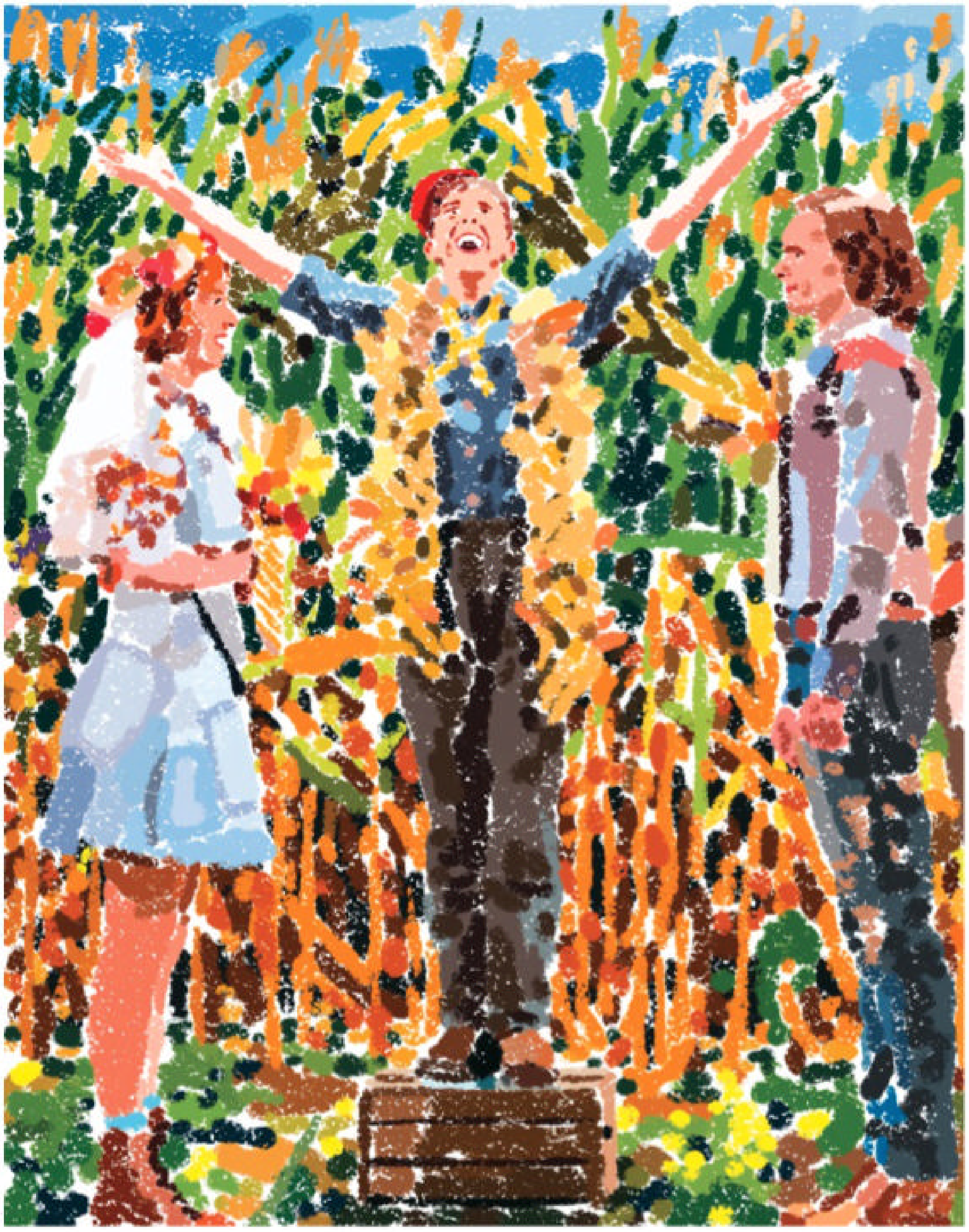
THE THEATRE

CORN COUNTRY

“Shucked” premières on Broadway.

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM



Lacking a polished message, the show gets by on charm and good humor.

The new musical “Shucked”—with music and lyrics by Brandy Clark and Shane McAnally and a book by Robert Horn, directed by Jack O’Brien and choreographed by Sarah O’Gleby, at the Nederlander—is exactly what you think it is, if you’ve seen any of its many ads: a show whose often disparate parts are held together only by tough, silky fibres of sometimes indigestible corn. The story is set in a mythical place called Cob County; its inhabitants are implicitly Midwestern, and, as the name of their locale attests, they all have a relentless tendency toward puns and other kernels of wordplay. They’re cut off from the outside world, happily secluded, shielded by a high, lush wall of their favorite vegetable, which they use to fuel their economy and feed their people. Nobody leaves Cob County, and nobody new comes in.

The drama starts when the corn dies. For no reason that any of Cob’s inhabitants can figure out, the crop goes bust, and the town begins to panic. Maizy (Caroline Innerbichler), a young, slightly oblivious optimist with a yen for adventure, decides to venture forth from her provincial home town—much to the chagrin of her fiancé, Beau (Andrew Durand)—to find some help for the wilting sheaves and the people, *her* people, who depend on them.

Now, you might read that setup and, like I did, expect some strands of more or less subtle social critique. A play about corn and its scarcity might, for example, unspool as a parable about America’s dependence on ethanol, and how that dependency skews our politics in agricultural states. Or maybe it could say something about how the swiftly warming climate and the attendant disruptions in the weather can make our food—and drinks and fuel and harvest-time decorations—ever more difficult to come by. The absolute enclosure of Cob County might prompt a consideration of traditionalism and xenophobia, and how they curdle into self-destruction in the very places they mean to protect. But, no, there’s none of that. This musical’s considerable successes and occasional wobbles both spring from the fact that its overriding motive seems to be simply to clear its authors’ heads of a lifetime’s worth of jokes about corn, while putting a few singable country-tinged songs across. Lacking some unitary purpose or polished message, it gets by on charm and good humor and little else.

“Shucked”’s lack of interest in coherence is evident from the beginning, when two storytellers, played by Ashley D. Kelley (Storyteller 1) and Grey Henson (Storyteller 2), start cracking jokes. They assure the audience that this is less a fleshed-out story than a “farm to fable” (hardy har) that they will narrate at their leisure. Instead of a pair of solemn monologuists, Kelley and Henson are, mercifully, more like a Catskills comedy team, rattling off quips in the rhythm of standup comedy. Their priority is to establish a rapport with the crowd, not to shellac their show with a fresh coat of meaning-making paint.

The storytellers are both able singers—Kelley more the soloist and Henson providing clear, sweet harmony. But they’re even better at peering over the lip of the stage and gently undermining the action as it unfolds. Sometimes they pander outright, almost totally independent of the context of the show, to the putatively liberal New York audience. When one character’s plan is foiled, Kelley quips, “he needed to find a plan B. But as we all know, there are a lot of people who would like to put a stop to Plan B.” Their relaying of Cob County’s founding myth is an exercise

ILLUSTRATION BY LUIS MAZÓN

in skewering Broadway’s Benetton-ad approach to casting and avoidance of historical awkwardness:

> Storyteller 1: The legend goes, a group of disparate, diverse Pilgrims—I know—escaping Separatist Puritan oppression, landed on miles of unclaimed, Non-Native American owned land.

Along with a nicely coördinated ensemble of choristers, they toss together joyous strings of corn references:

All: Yeah I heard corn
Got us thru the Great Depression
and the storms
Storyteller 1: They turned it into alcohol
Storyteller 2: Yeah that’s my favorite form
All: It’s Mazola and it’s ethanol, it’s corn
We were corn bred, we were corn fed
Out here, we really feel like we were chosen
We love corn flakes, we love corn cakes
Don’t know where we would be without that golden corn

Maizy’s clarity of heart and fuzziness of mind—traits she shares with Beau, even as her sojourn rends their relationship—underscores the tone of the show at its most entertaining: idiotic in the best possible way. Silliness is its creators’ North Star, often resulting in a juvenile exuberance—especially when it comes to sexual innuendo—that matches “South Park” ’s when “South Park” is good. Somehow, the first metropolis that Maizy finds is Tampa, Florida (another thing that doesn’t matter much here is geography), a place indicated by turquoise and pinkish light reminiscent of “Miami Vice.” She tracks down a scuzzy “Corn Doctor” named Gordy (John Behlmann), who—of course—is a foot specialist, or at least purports to be. Maizy brings him back to Cob County, where just about nobody—including Maizy’s cousin Lulu (Alex Newell) and Beau—trusts him. It’s an enjoyably dopey story full of enjoyably dopey characters.

That early bit about shoehorned-in “disparate” and “diverse” characters proves its own logic down the line. It scarcely matters that Maizy’s grandfather (Dwayne Clark) and cousin Lulu are Black—nobody ever explains the fact, or seems to want to. It’s just convenient for the songwriters, Clark and McAnally, who need Newell around to show off her powerful, agile, peacocking voice. On the night I attended, after Newell sang the empowering (if slightly—I’m sorry—corny) anthem “Independently Owned,” the audience erupted into show-pausing cheers. Durand’s Beau has a similarly bravura song, which, early on, offers this country-music-parodizing line: “When I wasn’t raising corn, I was raising hell.”

The foundation of the show’s sound is country music—there are often banjos twanging away somewhere in the mix. Clark and McAnally are popular country songwriters who have crafted hits for the likes of Keith Urban and Darius Rucker. Their facility with memorable melodies and clever lyrics is clearly discernible here, even if the smooth-listening imperatives of the Broadway sound often override the funkier, rootsier aspects of country.

That smoothing down—from country to country-flavored—provides another way of thinking about the show’s mostly innocuous but sometimes glaring avoidance of its own possible political implications. One of the more striking things about “Shucked” is how easily—give or take a joke about birth control—it could tour the country after its Broadway run, just as digestible in conservative precincts as in Times Square. With its gentle digs at small-town closed-mindedness, it might end up working best in the blue-voting urban precincts of red states.

Even the show’s constant references to sex are double-edged. One of the funniest characters is a guy named Peanut (Kevin Cahoon), whose jokes reminded me of Jeff Foxworthy’s Nascar-belt comedy: “I think if you have time to jump in front of a bullet for someone, they have time to move,” or “If your lawyer has a ponytail on his chin, you’re probably goin’ to prison.” He also makes jokes whose punch lines land somewhere near the anus. It becomes clearer as the show goes on that he’s queer, but in a lusty, loony way that makes his desires seem even more cartoonish than those of his blockheaded peers. It made me wonder what kind of laugh Horn, the book’s talented writer, was after, or whether the point was that he’d rather not choose.

Nobody wants a hard-edged “Shucked,” the kind that John Oliver might make, investigating at length the knotty issue of, say, agricultural subsidy. But, at times, this quite fun night out did seem to want to have something to say. Throw those ideas into the zapper, I say, and let ’em pop. ♦

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ON TELEVISION

HELL ON WHEELS

“Beef,” on Netflix.

BY INKOO KANG

Amy and Danny may do more damage to themselves than to each other.

As far as road rage goes, the outburst that sets off the rivalry in the wickedly loopy comic drama “Beef” is downright piddling. Danny Cho (Steven Yeun), a handyman in Los Angeles, attempts to pull his beater pickup truck out of a hardware-store parking lot, when he’s met by an obnoxiously long honk from a gleaming white Mercedes S.U.V., then a middle finger thrust out the window. Danny is in a foul enough mood that he gives chase to the other driver, Amy Lau (Ali Wong). After the pursuit leaves him unsatisfied, he decides to slowly insinuate himself into her home, even her family, to wreak chaos. His choice of target proves unfortunate; Amy is even more desperate for a sense of control, and thus for revenge.

Yet the most gratifying reveals in the ten-part Netflix series aren’t the wild escalations of the central pair but their rich psychological shadings. When Danny and Amy arrive at their respective homes after their encounter, neither can get out the full story about what happened. Danny, recounting the incident to his younger brother, Paul (Young Mazino), in the cramped apartment that they share, brags that he “scared the shit out of that motherfucker,” in a bit of masculine bravado that bears little resemblance to the truth. Amy, speaking to her woo-woo husband, George (Joseph Lee), can barely even begin to tell him about the confrontation before he shuts her down: “You’ve *got* to start focussing on the positive.” He’s a genial stay-at-home dad (with, perhaps, the world’s most beautiful sweater collection) and the coddled son of a famous artist, while she’s the overworked founder and aspirational face of a buzzy plant business she’s on the verge of selling for millions—and the one resentfully funding the couple’s bougie Calabasas life style. But the chasm between husband and wife is never wider than when George tells Amy, “Anger is just a transitory state of consciousness.” Amy and Danny accidentally uncork something in each other, and it’s a race to see whether they can do more harm to themselves or to the other.

“Beef” makes it both relevant and not that Danny and Amy are Asian American. As the season progresses, the show’s creator, Lee Sung Jin, stresses that his dual protagonists are especially damaged, beset by depression and likely something else: a “void” in their bodies, the characters agree, that feels “empty but solid.” But they also belong to a group—in Amy’s case, two groups—whose members have been socialized to believe that their value lies in their willingness to accommodate, to fit in, to oblige. Now, by having a stranger to fuck with, they’ve stumbled upon a seemingly safe outlet for their most antisocial impulses. The joke’s on them: when Amy catfishes Paul (using thirst traps from her young, white female employee’s Instagram), and when Danny befriends George (by posing as “Zane,” a fellow-cyclist), the pitiful hotheads find themselves confiding in their marks what they cannot express to their loved ones.

The series’ portraiture is most compelling when the alienation experienced by the characters achieves a larger sociological resonance. The soul-crushing interactions between Amy and the potential buyer of her business, Jordan (a bitch-perfect Maria Bello), are spectacularly cringey; a collector of artifacts from various cultures, Jordan treats Amy like another souvenir, a consumable affirmation of a pleasing stereotype. “You have this serene, Zen Buddhist thing,” Jordan airily tells Amy, who might be the first character I’ve ever seen masturbate with what turns out to be a Chekhov’s gun. Later, in couples counselling, Amy says that her Midwestern Chinese-immigrant

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS KIM

father and her Vietnamese-refugee mother didn't exactly model healthy emotional expression. She's worried that she's ill-equipped to parent her agitated young daughter, who acts out by picking at her skin and hitting a teacher. On a visit to her childhood home, Amy laments that she's filled with "generations of bad decisions sitting inside" her—though "Beef" smartly leaves open the possibility that Amy may be deflecting the blame for her personality flaws onto her upbringing. Either way, the story line feels like a confident step toward Asian American pop culture's maturation. Unlike the hallmarks of Asian Americana ("The Joy Luck Club," "Everything Everywhere All at Once"), "Beef" is less interested in dwelling on the cultural clashes that have led to the dislocation of the second generation than in exploring how that generation can raise their children without passing on all the hangups and traumas from their formative years.

Amy doesn't get much support from her mother-in-law, the outwardly colorful but patrician-cold Fumi (an excellent Patti Yasutake), who indulges her grown son while making demands on Amy. The two women are vividly written, and Wong is fantastic in her first leading dramatic role. But "Beef" is, at its heart, a study of male loneliness—a theme that, while bog-standard in prestige television, finds renewed urgency when couched in an Asian American context. The fraternal breakdown between Danny and Paul is a small tragedy all its own. As the elder brother—traditionally, a position of authority in Korean families—Danny is too caught up in being his brother's keeper to let Paul grow into his own person. Danny's insecurities, which are intensified by his ineptness at his job, lead him to constantly puff himself up, driving away his brother. Paul's withdrawal prompts Danny to turn toward their scuzzy cousin Isaac (David Choe, the celebrity muralist), a recent parolee whose scams cost Danny and Paul's parents their family business. A character worthy of "The Sopranos," Isaac is a bully and a charmer, as well as an exemplar of the way that tribal loyalties make victims more vulnerable to predators among their own kind. He bemoans that not even his family wants to spend time with him, and his pleas for companionship initially suggest that he may be the only dude around who's man enough to lay bare his emotional needs. But Isaac seemingly can't help wringing out anyone who happens to get too close.

Around the season's halfway point, I began excitedly telling friends that I'd never seen a more Korean American show. (Not that there's a lot of competition.) Konglish peppers the scenes between the Chos, as do Koreatown staples like musical rice cookers, space-age massage chairs, and the singsongy ringtone of the Korean messaging app KakaoTalk. The series takes an I.Y.K.Y.K. approach to many of these cultural details: if you know, you know. Among the biographical tidbits that Lee borrows from Wong and Yeun's lives are the latter's experience in Korean American church bands. Yeun, who plays against type, has a great voice, along with puckish comic timing. I laughingly winced at Danny's disbelief that Amy, an uppity creative type, isn't married to a white guy, and guffawed at Isaac's marvellously specific reflections on his petless childhood: "Korean kids, you couldn't ask for that kind of stuff back then. Like, that happened after 1990." But the series' most notable feat of representation is its centering of the mental-health struggles of Asian Americans. Amy's concern that she's sacrificed too much for her accomplishments and Danny's frustration that his efforts have yielded him none lead them to the same place: a profound self-loathing that leaves them in existential terror of their true selves emerging into view.

The layers of repressed despair shaken loose by Amy and Danny's feud are so precisely crafted that "Beef" can't help but disappoint when, toward the season's end, the stakes are raised to the melodrama of cinematic violence. It feels like a loss of assurance in the series' métier—an identity crisis at odds with the exceptional delicateness of what came before it. Another sharp swerve, to hallucinogen-inspired introspection, strains the show's already worn tonal elasticity. Like most onscreen drug trips, this one's only fitfully entertaining, steering us toward a destination that seems more preordained than earned. In a series with such a clear-eyed view of human darkness, the eleventh-hour fuzzies aren't given enough time for the warmth to sink in. ♦

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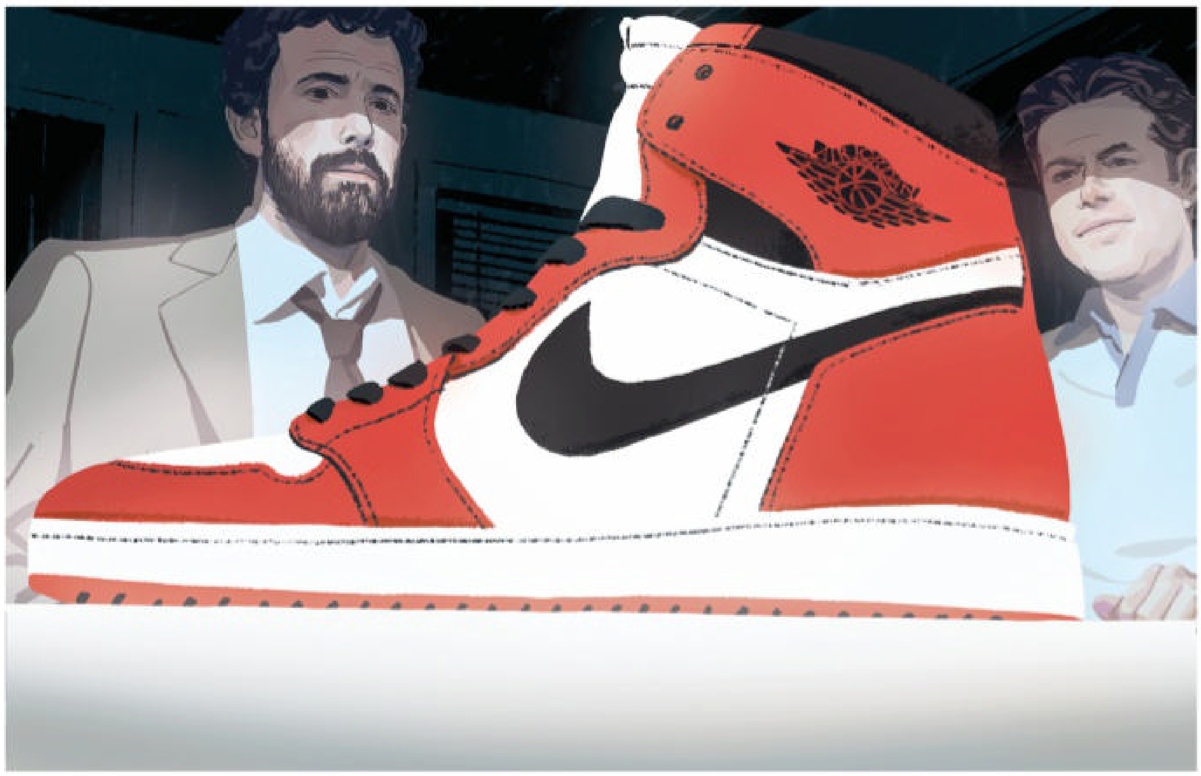
THE CURRENT CINEMA

TREAD SOFTLY

"Air" and "Paint."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Product placement is over. It's so lame. Why smuggle an item of merchandise into a movie, like contraband, and have people snicker at the subterfuge, when you can declare your product openly and lay it on the table? Why not make a film *about* the merch? That was the case with "Steve Jobs" (2015), which unfolded the creation myth of Apple; with "The Founder" (2016), which did the same for McDonald's; with "Tetris," now on Apple TV+; with the upcoming "BlackBerry," which is not, alas, about the harvesting of soft fruits; and with "Joy" (2015), which gave us our first chance—pray God it not be our last—to watch Jennifer Lawrence trying her hardest to sell mops.



In "Air," Ben Affleck and Matt Damon co-star as Nike executives.

The latest example of a ready-branded film is "Air," the product on this occasion being the Air Jordan. The movie is written by Alex Convery and directed by Ben Affleck, who also appears onscreen as Phil Knight, the co-founder and C.E.O. of Nike. The company, of course, was named for a Greek goddess, which may explain why Affleck is decked out with a beard and a hair style that fell out of fashion in 438 B.C. He also gets to drive a purple Porsche and to wear pink running pants, perilously loose around the crotch. Any looser and he'd risk an NC-17 rating. Whether or not Affleck is atoning for the shame of playing Batman, in the DC franchise, it's pretty sporting of him, in his own film, to set himself up as a comprehensive jerk.

Not that this is a sports movie. It's not even a shoe movie. It's a heroic saga of the *marketing* of a shoe. The action starts in 1984, heralded on the soundtrack by Dire Straits's "Money for Nothing" (which actually came out the following year). Gloom prevails at Nike headquarters, in Beaverton, Oregon; basketball-shoe sales have been cornered by Converse and Adidas, leaving Nike with a meagre seventeen per cent. The task facing Sonny Vaccaro (Matt Damon), who has been charged with turning things around, is to find three players who could front a new campaign. But Vaccaro doesn't want three players. He wants one player, and that's Michael Jordan.

The joke is that, by every measure of human grace, the hunter and the hunted are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Jordan is Jordan, whereas Vaccaro, as incarnated by Damon, is puffing, paunchy, and clad in such anonymous tones of beige and gray that he could die at his desk, on a cloudy afternoon, and nobody would notice. Yet he does have the knack of perseverance. Thus it is that, to the Krakatoan fury of Jordan's agent, David Falk (Chris Messina), Vaccaro shows up uninvited at the home of Jordan's parents, James (Julius Tennon) and Deloris (Viola Davis), in North Carolina, and pleads with them to consider Nike for their son. They graciously oblige; the interested parties convene in Beaverton; the deal is done.

Give Affleck a clear story and, as he demonstrated in "The Town" (2010) and "Argo" (2012), he will stick to the beat. (Too much ambiguity unnerves him; witness the sullen bafflement of "Gone Girl," in 2014.) "Air" is pacy, adept, and entertainingly well drilled, and his cast, which includes Jason Bateman, Chris Tucker, and Marlon Wayans, has a clubbable warmth. The scenes between Affleck and Damon, longtime friends offscreen, have a barbed geniality that finds its own rhythm; they're most likable when they needle each other. At one remove from the club is Matthew Maher, as Peter Moore—Nike's in-house genius, who designs the Air Jordan over a weekend. Unrushed and diffident, Moore thinks solely of the shoe, even though, as he realizes, it's a pawn in the marketing game.

Step back from "Air," however, and you begin to grasp how profoundly weird it is; weirder, I suspect, than Affleck knows. Observe Damon, Bateman, and Maher as they gaze upon the finished footwear, bathed in its mystical glow. They're like shepherds in a Rembrandt Nativity, lit by the natural radiance of the Christ child. And they're looking at a *shoe*. As yet, we are forbidden to see it for ourselves; the holy of holies must be guarded from our eyes. Likewise, although Michael Jordan is played by Damian Young, we never glimpse his face. He keeps his back to the camera at all times, the implication being that no mortal actor could hope to enshrine such a being. (Needless to say, there is no attempt to reconstruct Jordan's moves on court; instead, we get vintage clips of the real thing, on TV.) You may or may not have believed in Will Smith, when he

ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK LEGER

took the title role in "Ali" (2001), but at least you didn't have to spend two and a half hours watching him from behind.

What is it with "Air," then? "Like the old religious fetishism, with its convulsionary raptures and miraculous cures, the fetishism of commodities generates its own moments of fervent arousal." So says the French philosopher Guy Debord in "The Society of the Spectacle," his jeremiad of 1967. It is, I admit, unlikely that *every* viewer of Affleck's movie will race home and dive into neo-Marxist analyses of cultural homogenization; some folks will go out for a plate of ribs and a beer. But they might, as they digest, reflect with a frown on the dramatic centerpiece of the film—a speech delivered in the interests of justice by Deloris Jordan, over the phone, to Vaccaro. Because she is played by Viola Davis, a matchless purveyor of moral determination, you can't help recalling the sequence, in "Doubt" (2008), when Davis went head to head with Meryl Streep over the future prospects of another young man. If anything, the sequence in "Air" is yet more intense, because Davis is filmed in the tightest of closeups. And what is Deloris demanding? That her son be given a percentage of the proceeds from every Air Jordan that is sold. Believe in him, and there will be no doubt.

This movie, in short, kneels at the altar of high capitalism. It even comes with a prophecy. In Beaverton, Vaccaro tells Michael Jordan, in person, that he will be brought low, assailed, and then raised up again, because, unlike everybody else in the room, he is immortal. (Some of those tribulations are displayed in a speedy montage of flash-forwards.) The executives and agents who surround Jordan are like priests, with no visible family or home life; Vaccaro and Falk are both seen dining alone. Only once do we catch a whiff of something troubling in "Air," when a character mentions that many of Nike's shoes are manufactured in Taiwan and South Korea. So, does Affleck conclude his film with a wide shot of a factory floor, and of those who toil, on paltry pay, to make basketball shoes? Like hell. Rather, he ends with the revelation that Nike sold a hundred and sixty-two million dollars' worth of Air Jordans in the first year. Hallelujah.

The new Owen Wilson film, "Paint," is set in the present day, but only just. Written and directed by Brit McAdams, the movie takes place in and around Burlington, Vermont, and tells the tale of Carl Nargle, who is played by Wilson with a curved pipe, an explosion of frizzy blond curls, and an aura of invincible gentleness. When a friend says that her Uber has arrived, Nargle replies, "I don't know what that is." He hosts a show titled "Paint" on a local public-television station; daubing away, and addressing the camera, he deftly completes his pictures live on air. Most of them—and eventually all of them—depict Mt. Mansfield, the loftiest peak in the state. There's nothing wrong with returning obsessively to one theme; could it be that Nargle is drawn toward his mountain as Bonnard was to his wife, luminously untouched by time, in the bath?

No. Nargle is not a fraud, but his creative powers are of the tiniest. And he's a fool. Also, as it turns out, he's a predator. Over the years, most of the women who work at the station, such as Katherine (Michaela Watkins), Wendy (Wendi McLendon-Covey), and Beverly (Lusia Strus), have slipped into his clutches—specifically, into his van, better known as the Vantastic. All of this lends a fresh and menacing overtone to the mantra with which he signs off at the end of his show: "Thank you for going to a special place with me." What's peculiar about McAdams's film is the mildness of Nargle's comeuppance. Sure, he loses his job, his spot being taken by a younger painter named Ambrosia (Ciara Renée), but it's not too long before he rediscovers love. So dreamily forgiving is the atmosphere of the plot, in fact, that I found it downright creepy. Maybe all the characters are stoned. That would explain a lot.

"Paint" will win few friends in the arena of public broadcasting—which, the film suggests, is staffed by the semicompetent and enjoyed primarily by smiling seniors in retirement homes and boozers slumped in bars. Yet McAdams does have an eye, and an ear, for the minutiae of melancholy and provincial politesse. Listen to two lovers breaking up on CB radio ("It's over. Over"), or Katherine wistfully pondering a change of career: "Albany has a ton to offer," she says. "I-90 and I-87 go right through the middle of it." As for Nargle, he seems like a refugee from a Christopher Guest film, and I can imagine him, say, as an artist-in-residence among the folksingers of "A Mighty Wind" (2003). Whether he merits a movie to himself is another matter. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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VOLUME XCIX, NO. 9, April 17, 2023. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four planned combined issues, as indicated on the issue's cover, and other combined or extra issues) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Lauren Kamen Macri, vice-president of sales; Rob Novick, vice-president of finance; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue and APAC; Anna Wintour, chief content officer; Samantha Morgan, chief of staff; Sanjay Bhakta, chief product and technology officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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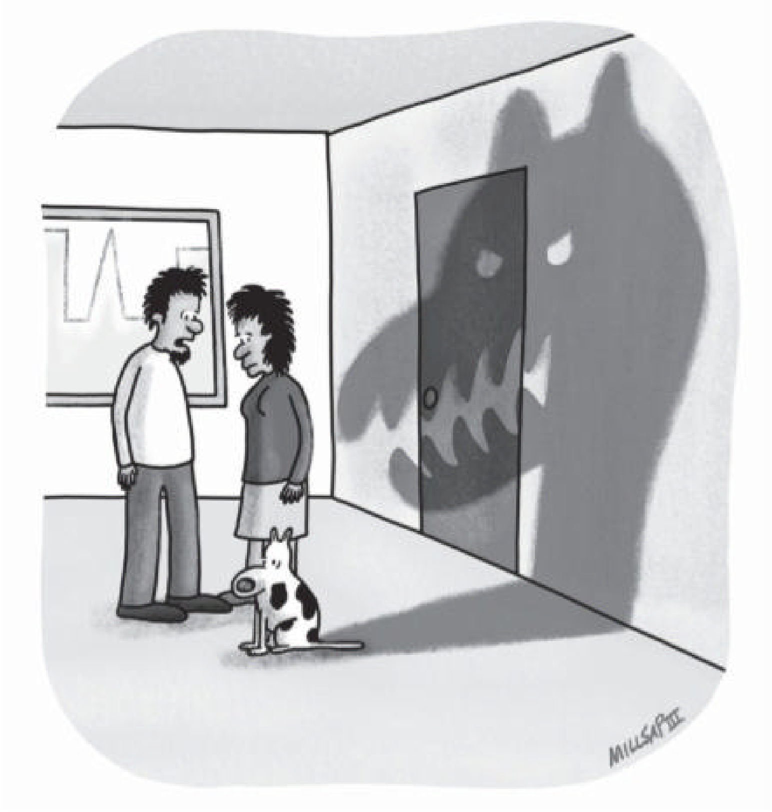
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Lonnie Millsap, must be received by Sunday, April 16th. The finalists in the April 3rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 8th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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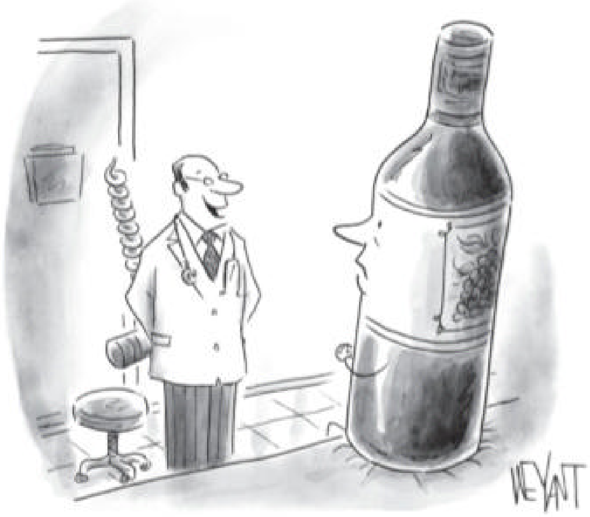
THE FINALISTS

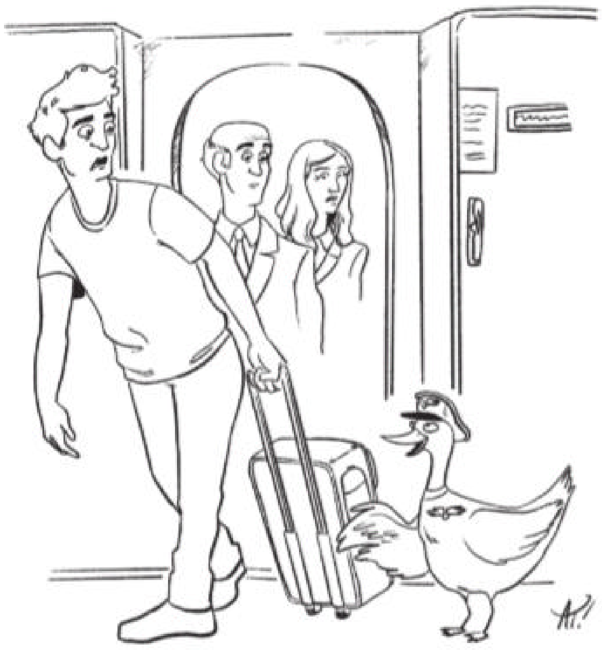


“I'll need to take a sample.”
Jessica Misener, Ann Arbor, Mich.

“There is a way to stop the aging process.”
Bryan Michurski, Minneapolis, Minn.

“We'll both be feeling better in no time.”
Susan Gale Wickes, Richmond, Ind.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“In the unlikely event of a water landing, I'm your guy.”
Brendan O'Meara, Eugene, Ore.

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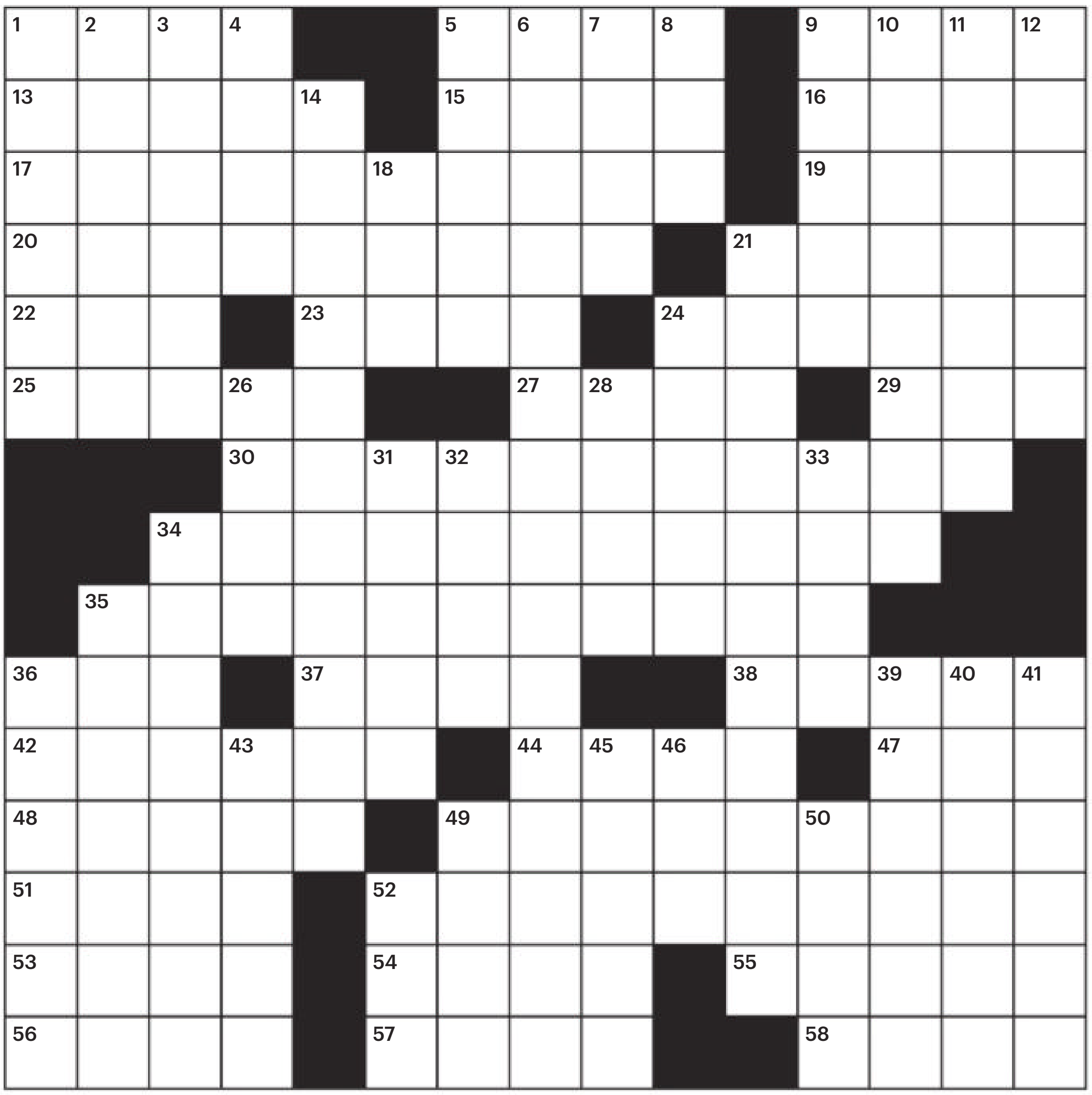
THE CROSSWORD

A lightly challenging puzzle.

BY PAOLO PASCO



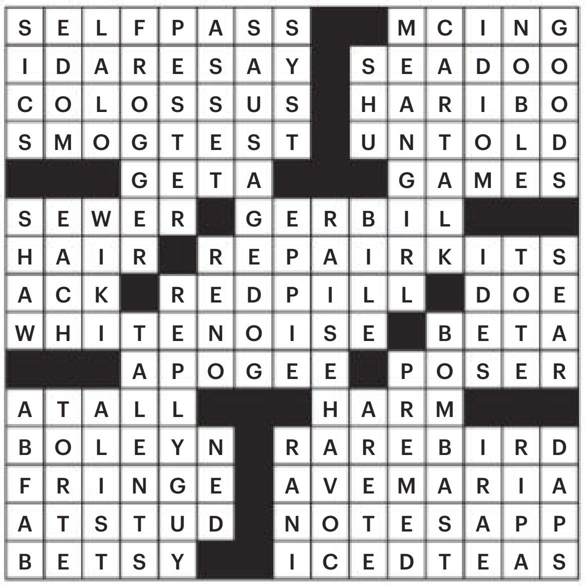
ACROSS

1 Alfonso Cuarón film that was the first Netflix production nominated for the Best Picture Oscar
5 Part of a cherry that might get tongue-tied
9 Tosses in
13 Style of some eye-catching pictures
15 Blacken, as a steak
16 Trickle (through)
17 Weight-lifting exercise done on one's back
19 Rating for "Squid Game"
20 Talking through one's issues, maybe
21 Issue to talk about
22 A big old goose egg
23 Object that appears to be cut and restored in a classic magic trick
24 ___ book (guide for an international traveller)
25 Emanation from a wok, perhaps
27 One of two awarded to "A Strange Loop"
29 "Ideas Worth Spreading" nonprofit
30 Flexible sections of some roofs?
34 Interactive-fiction video-game genre
35 Person who works with their buds?
36 Janitorial tool
37 A long, long time
38 Horan formerly of One Direction
42 Has because of
44 "Fear of Flying" author Erica
47 "Winnie-the-Pooh" character sometimes seen in a pouch
48 *Patatas bravas*, *croquetas*, and the like
49 Big-picture person?
51 Wilson known for saying "wow"
52 Do some light snooping
53 Have a hankering for
54 "The ___ Corner" (James Baldwin play partially set in a church)
55 "Fear and Trembling" author Kierkegaard
56 The Big Board, for short
57 What Diplomacy games simulate
58 Heading above a list of tasks

DOWN

1 Birds with colorful breasts
2 Gift giver's exhortation
3 It can be found underneath a thick crust
4 Shape of a croquet wicket
5 Jettison
6 2022 Vera Drew film that adapts a DC Comics character's story into a trans allegory
7 "Whoa there!"
8 ___ Fields (sister brand of T.C.B.Y.)
9 "The Maltese Falcon" actress Mary
10 Actor in "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel" and "Hotel Mumbai"
11 Ends often described as "untimely"
12 Zoned (out)
14 Devices central to some household squabbles
18 No newbie
21 2012 film with a post-credits scene at a shawarma restaurant
24 Denzel Washington's character in "Flight," for one
26 Without changes
28 Punishments for Internet trolls
31 Spanish word in some hot-sauce names
32 ___ Britain (London institution that's home to some Larry Achiampong works)
33 Hatcher who voiced Other Mother in "Coraline"
34 They're charged for taking hits
35 Drag out of one's spot, maybe
36 Label for Martha and the Vandellas
39 Castro who created and starred in the Comedy Central series "Alternatino"
40 Gave for a short time
41 "God forbid!"
43 "*À votre ___!*"
45 Pizzeria fixtures
46 Long who won an N.A.A.C.P. Image Award in 2023, for her role in "The Best Man: The Final Chapters"
49 N.Y.C. institution that's home to Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans"
50 Residue on a chimney brush
52 "___ Patrol" (kids' show about rescue dogs)

Solution to the previous puzzle:



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I	D	A	R	E	S	A	Y	■	S	E	A	D	O	O
C	O	L	O	S	S	U	S	■	H	A	R	I	B	O
S	M	O	G	T	E	S	T	■	U	N	T	O	L	D
■	■	■	G	E	T	A	■	■	■	G	A	M	E	S
S	E	W	E	R	■	G	E	R	B	I	L	■	■	■
H	A	I	R	■	R	E	P	A	I	R	K	I	T	S
A	C	K	■	R	E	D	P	I	L	L	■	D	O	E
W	H	I	T	E	N	O	I	S	E	■	B	E	T	A
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B	O	L	E	Y	N	■	R	A	R	E	B	I	R	D
F	R	I	N	G	E	■	A	V	E	M	A	R	I	A
A	T	S	T	U	D	■	N	O	T	E	S	A	P	P
B	E	T	S	Y	■	■	I	C	E	D	T	E	A	S

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